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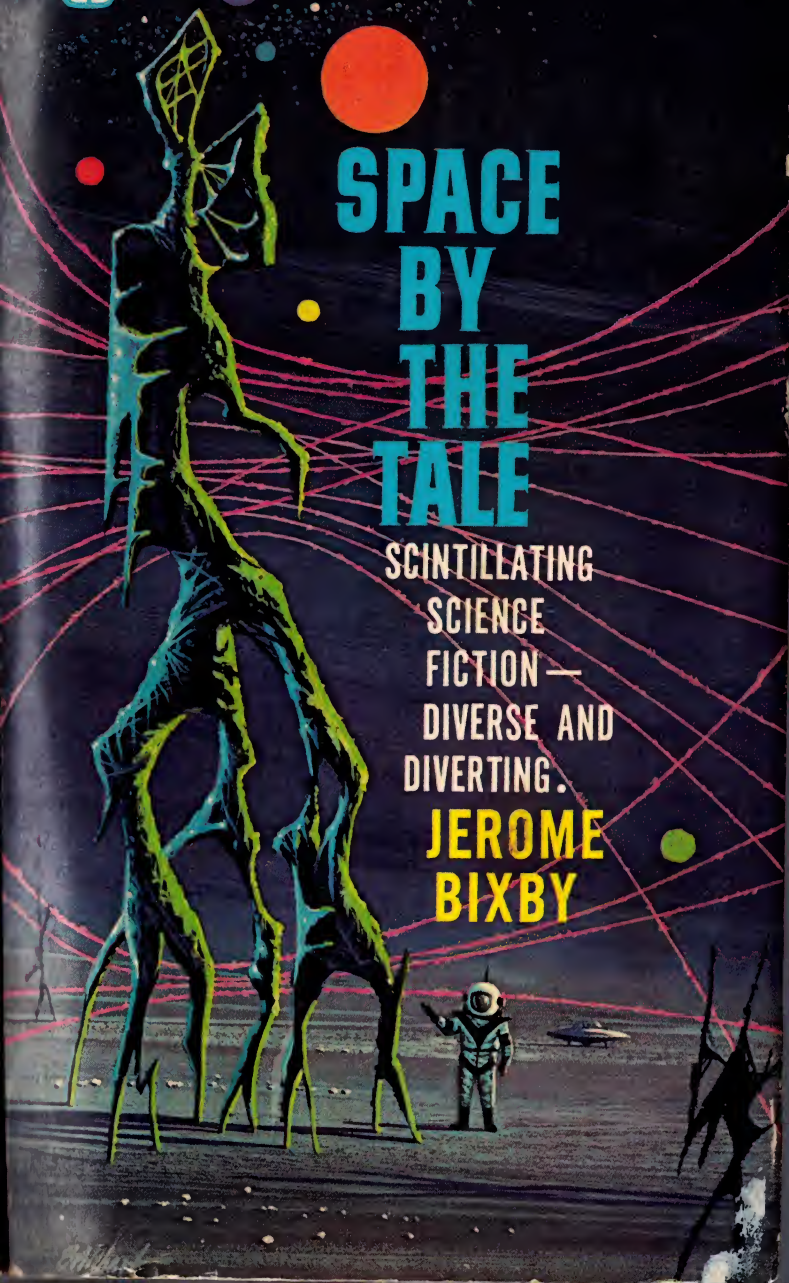
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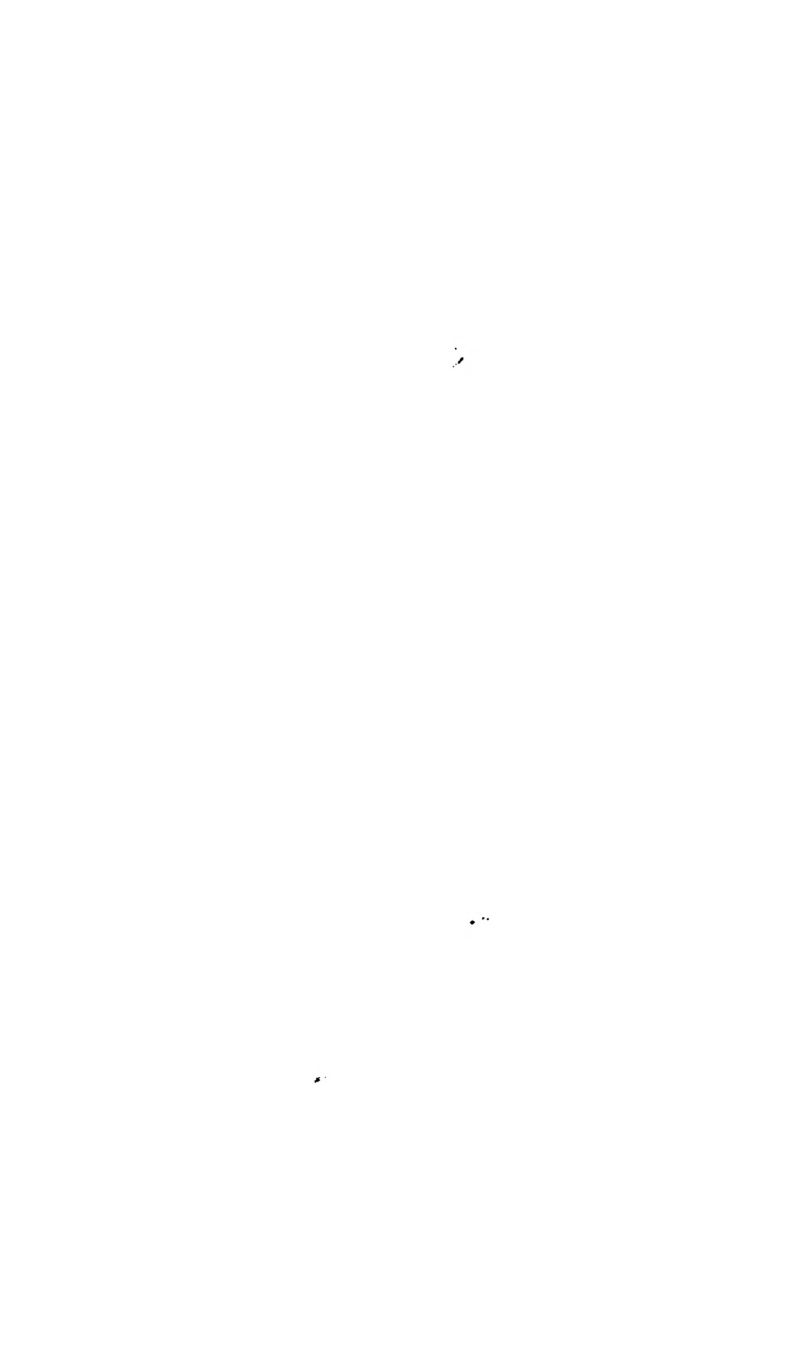
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SPACE BY THE TALE

SCINTILLATING
SCIENCE
FICTION —
DIVERSE AND
DIVERTING.

JEROME
BIXBY





HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO MEET . . .

The fastest gun in the West—except that he didn't
really know why.

A truly likable vampire—heaven knows where *that*
leads.

A dog—and not Abraham Lincoln's doctor's dog
either. (but he'll knock you for a delightful
loop just the same).

A very peculiar kind of a devil.

And an odd sort of outhouse.

In fact, if you've a mind to, you can even go
voluntarily insane.

That's the kind of writer Jerome Bixby is.

This is an original publication—not a reprint.

**SPACE
BY
THE
TALE**

Jerome Bixby

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

To my sons, Russell and Jan

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THE DRAW

JOE DOOLIN'S MY NAME. COWHAND—WORK FOR OLD FARREL over at Lazy F beyond the Pass. Never had much of anything exciting happen to me—just punched cows and lit up on pay-day—until the day I happened to ride through the Pass on my way to town and saw young Buck Tarrant's draw.

Now, Buck'd always been a damn good shot. Once he got his gun in his hand, he could put a bullet right where he wanted it up to twenty paces, and within an inch of his aim up to a hundred feet. But Lord God, he couldn't draw to save his life—I'd seen him a couple of times before in the Pass, trying to. He'd face a tree and go into a crouch, and I'd know he was pretending the tree was Billy the Kid or somebody, and then he'd slap leather—and his clumsy hand would wallop his gunbutt, he'd yank like hell, his old Peacemaker would come staggering out of its holster like a bear in heat, and finally he'd line on his target and plug it dead center. But the whole business took about a second and a half, and by the time he'd ever finished his fumbling in a real fight, Billy the Kid or Sheriff Ben Randolph over in town or even me, Joe Doolin, could have cut him in half.

So this time, when I was riding along through the Pass and saw Buck upslope from me under the trees, I just grinned and didn't pay too much attention.

He stood facing an old elm tree, and I could see he'd tacked a playing card about four feet up the trunk, about where a man's heart would be.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw him go into his gunman's crouch. He was about sixty feet away from me, and, like I said, I wasn't paying much mind to him.

I heard the shot, flat down the rocky slope that separated us. I grinned again, picturing that fumbly draw of his, the wild slap at leather, the gun coming out drunklike, maybe even him dropping it—I'd seen him do that once or twice.

It got me to thinking about him, as I rode closer.

He was a bad one. Nobody said any different than that. Just bad. He was a bony runt of about eighteen, with bulging eyes and a wide mouth that was always turned down at the corners. He got this nickname Buck because he had buck teeth, not because he was heap man. He was some handy with his fists, and he liked to pick ruckuses with kids he was sure he could lick. But the tipoff on Buck is that he'd blat like a two-day calf to get out of mixing with somebody he was scared of—which meant somebody his own size or bigger. He'd jaw his way out of it, or just turn and slink away with his tail along his belly. His dad had died a couple years before, and he lived with his ma on a small ranch out near the Pass. The place was falling to pieces, because Buck wouldn't lift a hand to do any work around—his ma just couldn't handle him at all. Fences were down, and the yard was all weedgrown, and the house needed some repairs—but all Buck ever did was hang around town, trying to rub up against some of the tough customers who drank in the Once Again Saloon, or else he'd ride up and lie around under the trees along the top of the Pass and just think—or, like he was today, he'd practise drawing and throwing down on trees and rocks.

Guess he always wanted to be tough. Really tough. He tried to walk with tough men, and, as we found out later, just about all he ever thought about while he was lying around was how he could be tougher than the next two guys. Maybe you've known characters like that—for some damfool reason they just got to be able to whup anybody who comes along, and they feel low and mean when they can't, as if the size of a man's fist was the size of the man.

So that was Buck Tarrant—a halfsized, poisonous, no-good kid who wanted to be a hardcase.

But he'd never be, not in a million years. That's what made it funny—and kind of pitiful too. There wasn't no real strength in him, only a scared hate. It takes guts as well as speed to be tough with a gun, and Buck was just a nasty little rat of a kid who'd probably always counterpunch his way through life when he punched at all. He'd kite for cover if you lifted a lip.

I heard another shot, and looked up the slope. I was near enough now to see that the card he was shooting at was a ten of diamonds—and that he was plugging the pips one by one. Always could shoot, like I said.

Then he heard me coming, and whirled away from the tree, his gun holstered, his hand held out in front of him like he must have imagined Hickock or somebody held it when he was ready to draw.

I stopped my horse about ten feet away and just stared

at him. He looked real funny in his baggy old levis and dirty checkered shirt and that big gun low on his hip, and me knowing he couldn't handle it worth a damn.

"Who you trying to scare, Buck?" I said. I looked him up and down and snickered. "You look about as dangerous as a shepherd's wife."

"And you're a son of a bitch," he said.

I stiffened and shoved out my jaw. "Watch that, runt, or I'll get off and put my foot in your mouth and pull you on like a boot!"

"Will you now," he said nastily, "you son of a bitch?"

And he drew on me . . . and I goddam near fell backwards off my saddle!

I swear, I hadn't even seen his hand move, he'd drawn so fast! That gun just practically *appeared* in his hand!

"Will you now?" he said again, and the bore of his gun looked like a greased gate to hell.

I sat in my saddle scared spitless, wondering if this was when I was going to die. I moved my hands out away from my body, and tried to look friendlylike—actually, I'd never tangled with Buck, just razzed him a little now and then like everybody did; and I couldn't see much reason why he'd want to kill me.

But the expression on his face was full of gloating, full of wildness, full of damn-you recklessness—exactly the expression you'd look to find on a kid like Buck who suddenly found out he was the deadliest gunman alive.

And that's just what he was, believe me.

Once I saw Bat Masterson draw—and he was right up there with the very best. Could draw and shoot accurately in maybe half a second or so—you could hardly see his hand move; you just heard the slap of hand on gunbutt, and a split-second later the shot. It takes a lot of practise to be able to get a gun out and on target in that space of time, and that's what makes gunmen. Practise, and a knack to begin with. And, I guess, the yen to be a gunman, like Buck Tarrant'd always had.

When I saw Masterson draw against Jeff Steward in Abilene, it was that way—slap, crash, and Steward was three-eyed. Just a blur of motion.

But when Buck Tarrant drew on me, right now in the Pass, I didn't see any motion *atall*. He just crouched, and then his gun was on me. Must have done it in a millionth of a second, if a second has millionths.

It was the fastest draw I'd ever seen. It was, I reckoned, the fastest draw anybody'd ever seen. It was an impossibly fast draw—a man's hand just couldn't move to his holster

that fast, and grab and drag a heavy Peacemaker up in a two-foot arc that fast.

It was plain damn impossible—but there it was.

And there I was.

I didn't say a word. I just sat and thought about things, and my horse wandered a little farther up the slope and then stopped to chomp grass. All the time, Buck Tarrant was standing there, poised, that wild gloating look in his eyes, knowing he could kill me anytime and knowing I knew it.

When he spoke, his voice was shaky—it sounded like he wanted to bust out laughing, and not a nice laugh either.

"Nothing to say, Doolin?" he said. "Pretty fast, huh?"

I said, "Yeah, Buck. Pretty fast." And my voice was shaky too, but not because I felt like laughing any.

He spat, eying me arrogantly. The ground rose to where he stood, and our heads were about on a level. But I felt he was looking down.

"Pretty fast!" he sneered. "Faster'n anybody!"

"I reckon it is, at that," I said.

"Know how I do it?"

"No."

"I *think*, Doolin. I *think* my gun into my hand. How d'you like that?"

"It's awful fast, Buck."

"I just *think*, and my gun is there in my hand. Some draw, huh!"

"Sure is."

"You're damn right it is, Doolin. Faster'n anybody!"

I didn't know what his gabbling about "thinking his gun into his hand" meant—at least not then, I didn't—but I sure wasn't minded to question him on it. He looked wild-eyed enough right now to start taking bites out of the nearest tree.

He spat again and looked me up and down. "You know, you can go to hell, Joe Doolin. You're a lousy, God damn, white-livered son of a bitch." He grinned coldly.

Not an insult, I knew now, but a deliberate taunt. I'd broken jaws for a lot less—I'm no runt, and I'm quick enough to hand back crap if some lands on me. But now I wasn't interested.

He saw I was mad, though, and stood waiting.

"You're fast enough, Buck," I said, "so I got no idea of trying you. You want to murder me, I guess I can't stop you—but I ain't drawing. No, sir, that's for sure."

"And a coward to boot," he jeered.

"Maybe," I said. "Put yourself in my place, and ask yourself why in hell I should kill myself?"

"Yellow!" he snarled, looking at me with his bulging eyes full of meanness and confidence.

My shoulders got tight, and it ran down along my gun arm. I never took that from a man before.

"I won't draw," I said. "Reckon I'll move on instead, if you'll let me."

And I picked up my reins, moving my hands real careful-like, and turned my horse around and started down the slope. I could feel his eyes on me, and I was half waiting for a bullet in the back. But it didn't come. Instead Buck Tarrant called, "Doolin!"

I turned my head. "Yeah?"

He was standing there in the same position. Somehow he reminded me of a crazy, runt wolf—his eyes were almost yellowish, and when he talked he moved his lips too much, mouthing his words, and his big crooked teeth flashed in the sun. I guess all the hankering for toughness in him was coming out—he was acting now like he'd always wanted to—cocky, unafraid, mean—because now he wore a bigger gun than anybody. It showed all over him, like poison coming out of his skin.

"Doolin," he called. "I'll be in town around three this afternoon. Tell Ben Randolph for me that he's a son of a bitch. Tell him he's a dunghead sheriff. Tell him he'd better look me up when I get there, or else get outa town and stay out. You got that?"

"I got it, Buck."

"Call me Mr. Tarrant, you Irish bastard."

"Okay . . . Mr. Tarrant," I said, and reached the bottom of the slope and turned my horse along the road through the Pass. About a hundred yards farther on, I hipped around in the saddle and looked back. He was practising again—the crouch, the fantastic draw, the shot.

I rode on toward town, to tell Ben Randolph he'd either have to run or die.

Ben was a lanky, slab-sided Texan who'd come up north on a drive ten years before and liked the Arizona climate and stayed. He was a good sheriff—tough enough to handle most men, and smart enough to handle the rest. Fourteen years of it had kept him lean and fast.

When I told him about Buck, I could see he didn't know whether he was tough or smart or fast enough to get out of this one.

He leaned back in his chair and started to light his pipe, and then stared at the match until it burned his fingers without touching it to the tobacco.

"You sure, Joe?" he said.

"Ben, I saw it two times. At first I just couldn't believe my eyes—but I tell you, he's fast. He's faster'n you or me or Hickock or anybody. God knows where he got it, but he's got the speed."

"But," Ben Randolph said, lighting another match, "it just don't happen that way." His voice was almost mildly complaining. "Not overnight. Gun-speed's something you work on—it comes slow, mighty slow. You know that. How in hell could Buck Tarrant turn into a fire-eating gunslinger in a few days?" He paused and puffed. "You sure, Joe?" he asked again, through a cloud of smoke.

"Yes."

"And he wants me."

"That's what he said."

Ben Randolph sighed. "He's a bad kid, Joe—just a bad kid. If his father hadn't died, I reckon he might have turned out better. But his mother ain't big enough to wallop his butt the way it needs."

"You took his gun away from him a couple times, didn't you, Ben?"

"Yeah. And ran him outa town too, when he got too pestiferous. Told him to get the hell home and help his ma."

"Guess that's why he wants you."

"That. And because I'm sheriff. I'm the biggest gun around here, and he don't want to start at the bottom, not him. He's gonna show the world right away."

"He can do it, Ben."

He sighed again. "I know. If what you say's true, he can sure show *me* anyhow. Still, I got to take him up on it. You know that. I can't leave town."

I looked at his hand lying on his leg—the fingers were trembling. He curled them into a fist, and the fist rembled.

"You ought to, Ben," I said.

"Of course I ought to," he said, a little savagely. "But I can't. Why, what'd happen to this town if I was to cut and run? Is there anyone else who could handle him? Hell, no."

"A crazy galoot like that," I said slowly, "if he gets too damn nasty, is bound to get kilt." I hesitated. "Even in the back, if he's too good to take from the front."

"Sure," Ben Randolph said. "Sooner or later. But what about meantime? . . . how many people will he have to kill before somebody gets angry or nervy enough to kill *him*? That's my job, Joe—to take care of this kind of thing. Those people he'd kill are depending on me to get between him and them. Don't you see?"

I got up. "Sure, Ben, I see. I just wish *you* didn't."

He let out another mouthful of smoke. "You got any idea what he meant about thinking his gun into his hand?"

"Not the slightest. Some crazy explanation he made up to account for his sudden speed, I reckon."

Another puff. "You figure I'm a dead man, Joe, huh?"

"It looks kind of that way."

"Yeah, it kind of does, don't it?"

At four that afternoon Buck Tarrant came riding into town like he owned it. He sat his battered old saddle like a rajah on an elephant, and he held his right hand low beside his hip in an exaggerated gunman's stance. With his floppy hat over at a cocky angle, and his big eyes and scrawny frame, he'd have looked funny as hell trying to look like a tough hombre—except that he *was* tough now, and everybody in town knew it because I'd warned them. Otherwise somebody might have jibed him, and the way things were now, that could lead to a sudden grave.

Nobody said a word all along the street as he rode to the hitchrail in front of the Once Again and dismounted. There wasn't many people around to say anything—most everybody was inside, and all you could see of them was a shadow of movement behind a window there, the flutter of a curtain there.

Only a few men sat in chairs along the boardwalks under the porches, or leaned against the porchposts, and they just sort of stared around, looking at Buck for a second and then looking off again if he turned toward them.

I was standing near to where Buck hitched up. He swaggered up the steps of the saloon, his right hand poised, his bulging eyes full of hell.

"You tell him?" he asked.

I nodded. "He'll look you up, like you said."

Buck laughed shortly. "I'll be waiting. I don't like that lanky bastard. I reckon I got some scores to settle with him." He looked at me, and his face twisted into what he thought was a tough snarl. Funny—you could see he really wasn't tough down inside. There wasn't any hard core of confidence and strength. His toughness was in his holster, and all the rest of him was acting to match up to it.

"You know," he said, "I don't like you either, Irish. Maybe I oughta kill you. Hell, why not?"

Now, the only reason I'd stayed out of doors that afternoon was I figured Buck had already had one chance to kill me and had nothing against me, so I was safe. And I had an idea that maybe, when the showdown came, I might be able to help out Ben Randolph somehow.

Now, though, I wished to hell I hadn't stayed outside. I wished I was behind one of them windows, looking out at somebody else get told by Buck Tarrant that maybe he oughta kill him.

"But I won't," Buck said, grinning nastily. "Because you done me a favor. You run off and told the sheriff just like I told you—just like the goddam white-livered Irish sheepherder you are. Ain't that so?"

I nodded, my jaw set so hard with anger that the flesh felt stretched.

He waited for me to move against him. When I didn't, he laughed and swaggered to the door of the saloon. "Come on, Irish," he said over his shoulder. "I'll buy you a drink of the best."

I followed him in, and he went over to the bar, walking heavy, and looked old Menner right in the eye and said, "Give me a bottle of the best stuff you got in the house."

Menner looked at the kid he'd kicked out of his place a dozen times, and his face was white. He reached behind him and got a bottle and put it on the bar.

"Two glasses," said Buck Tarrant.

Menner carefully put two glasses on the bar.

"Clean glasses."

Menner polished two other glasses on his apron and set them down.

"You don't want no money for this likker, do you, Menner?" Buck asked.

"No, sir."

"You'd just take it home and spend it on that fat heifer of a wife you got, and on them two little halfwit brats, wouldn't you?"

Menner nodded.

"Hell, they really ain't worth the trouble, are they?"

"No, sir."

Buck snickered and poured two shots and handed me one. He looked around the saloon and saw that it was almost empty—just Menner behind the bar, and a drunk asleep with his head on his arms at a table near the back, and a little gent in fancy town clothes fingering his drink at a table near the front window and not even looking at us.

"Where is everybody?" he asked Menner.

"Why, sir, I reckon they're home, most of them," Menner said. "It being a hot day and all—"

"Bet it'll get hotter," Buck said, hard.

"Yes, sir."

"I guess they didn't want to really feel the heat, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it's going to get so hot, you old bastard, that everybody'll feel it. You know that?"

"If you say so, sir."

"It might even get hot for you. Right now even. What do you think of that, huh?"

"I—I—"

"You thrun me outa here a couple times, remember?"

"Y-yes . . . but I—"

"Look at this!" Buck said—and his gun was in his hand, and he didn't seem to have moved at all, not an inch. I was looking right at him when he did it—his hand was on the bar, resting beside his shotglass, and then suddenly his gun was in it and pointing right at old Menner's belly.

"You know," Buck said, grinning at how Menner's fear was crawling all over his face, "I can put a bullet right where I want to. Wanta see me do it?"

His gun crashed, and flame leaped across the bar, and the mirror behind the bar had a spiderweb of cracks radiating from a round black hole.

Menner stood there, blood leaking down his neck from a split earlobe.

Buck's gun went off again, and the other earlobe was a red tatter.

And Buck's gun was back in its holster with the same speed it had come out—I just couldn't see his hand move.

"That's enough for now," he told Menner. "This is right good likker, and I guess I got to have somebody around to push it across the bar for me, and you're as good as anybody to do jackass jobs like that."

He didn't ever look at Menner again. The old man leaned back against the shelf behind the bar, trembling, two trickles of red running down his neck and staining his shirt collar—I could see he wanted to touch the places where he'd been shot, to see how bad they were or just to rub at the pain, but he was afraid to raise a hand. He just stood there, looking sick.

Buck was staring at the little man in town clothes, over by the window. The little man had reared back at the shots, and now he was sitting up in his chair, his eyes straight on Buck. The table in front of him was wet where he'd spilled his drink when he'd jumped.

Buck looked at the little guy's fancy clothes and small mustache, and grinned. "Come on," he said to me, and picked up his drink and started across the floor. "Find out who the dude is."

He pulled out a chair and sat down—and I saw he was careful to sit facing the front door, and also where he could see out the window.

I pulled out another chair and sat.

"Good shooting, huh?" Buck asked the little guy.

"Yes," said the little guy. "Very fine shooting. I confess, it quite startled me."

Buck laughed harshly. "Startled the old guy too . . ." He raised his voice. "Ain't that right, Menner? Wasn't you startled?"

"Yes, sir," came Menner's pain-filled voice from the bar.

Buck looked back at the little man—let his insolent gaze travel up and down the fancy waistcoat, the string tie, the sharp face with its mustache and narrow mouth and black eyes. He looked longest at the eyes, because they didn't seem to be scared.

He looked at the little guy, and the little guy looked at Buck, and finally Buck looked away. He tried to look wary as he did it, as if he was just fixing to make sure that nobody was around to sneak-shoot him—but you could see he'd been stared down.

When he looked back at the little guy, he was scowling. "Who're you, mister?" he said. "I never seen you before."

"My name is Jacob Pratt, sir. I'm traveling through to San Francisco. I'm waiting for the evening stage."

"Drummer?"

"Excuse me?"

For a second Buck's face got ugly. "You heard me, mister, You a drummer?"

"I heard you, young man, but I don't quite understand. Do you mean, am I a musician? A performer upon the drums?"

"No, you goddam fool—I mean, what're you selling? Snake-bite medicine? Likker? Soap?"

"Why—I'm not selling anything. I'm a professor, sir."

"Well, I'll be damned." Buck looked at him a little more carefully. "A professor, huh? Of what?"

"Of psychology, sir."

"What's that?"

"It's the study of man's behavior—of the reasons why we act as we do."

Buck laughed again, and it was more of a snarl. "Well, professor, you just stick around here then, and I'll show you some *real* reasons for people acting like they do! From now on, I'm the big reason in this town . . . they'll jump when I yell frog, or else!"

His hand was flat on the table in front of him—and suddenly his Peacemaker was in it, pointing at the professor's fourth vest-button. "See what I mean, huh?"

The little man blinked. "Indeed I do," he said, and stared

at the gun as if hypnotized. Funny, though—he still didn't seem scared—just a lot interested.

Sitting there and just listening, I thought about something else funny—how they were both just about of a size, Buck and the professor, and so strong in different ways: with the professor, you felt he was strong inside—a man who knew a lot, about things and about himself—while with Buck it was all on the outside, on the surface: he was just a milksop kid with a deadly sting.

Buck was still looking at the professor, as carefully as he had before. He seemed to hesitate for a second, his mouth twisting. Then he said, "You're an eddicated man, ain't you? I mean, you studied a lot. Ain't that right?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Well . . ." Again Buck seemed to hesitate. The gun in his hand lowered until the end of the barrel rested on the table. "Look," he said slowly, "maybe you can tell me how in hell . . ."

When he didn't go on, the professor said, "Yes?"

"Nothing."

"You were going to say—?"

"Nothing! I wasn't going to say nothing!"

"Of course you were," the little man said calmly.

Buck looked at him, his bulging eyes narrowed, the gunman's smirk on his lips again. "Are you telling me what's true and what ain't," he said softly, "with my gun on you?"

"Does the gun change anything?"

Buck tapped the heavy barrel on the table. "I say it changes a hell of a lot of things." *Tap* went the barrel. "You wanta argue?"

"Not with the gun," the professor said. "It always wins. I'll talk with you, however, if you'll talk with your mouth instead of with the gun."

By this time I was filled with admiration for the professor's guts, and fear that he'd get a bullet in them . . . I was all set to duck, in case Buck lost his temper and started throwing lead.

But suddenly Buck's gun was back in his holster. I saw the professor blink again in astonishment.

"You know," Buck said, grinning loosely, "you got a lotta nerve, professor. Maybe you *can* tell me what I wanta know."

He didn't look at the little man when he talked—he was glancing around, being "wary" again. And grinning that grin at the same time. You could see he was off-balance—he was acting like everything was going just like he wanted it; but actually the professor had beaten him again, words against the gun, eyes against eyes.

The professor's dark eyes were level on Buck's right now. "What is it you want to know?"

"This—" Buck said, and his gun was in his hand again, and it was the first time when he did it that his face stayed sober and kind of stupid-looking, his normal expression, instead of getting wild and dangerous. "How—do you know how I *do* it?"

"Well," the professor said, "suppose you give me your answer first, if you have one. It might be the right one."

"I—" Buck shook his head—"Well, it's like I *think* the gun into my hand. It happened the first time this morning. I was standing out in the Pass where I always practise drawing, and I was wishing I could draw faster'n anybody who ever lived—I was wishing I could just get my gun outa leather in no time at all. And—" the gun was back in his holster in the blink of an eye—"that's how it happened. My gun was in my hand. Just like that. I didn't even reach for it—I was just getting set to draw, and had my hand out in front of me . . . and my gun was in my hand before I knew what'd happened. God, I was so surprised I almost fell over!"

"I see," said the professor slowly. "You *think* it into your hand?"

"Yeah, kind of."

"Would you do it now, please?" And the professor leaned forward so he could see Buck's holster, eyes intent.

Buck's gun appeared in his hand.

The professor let out a long breath. "Now think it back into its holster."

It was there.

"You did not move your arm either time," said the professor.

"That's right," said Buck.

"The gun was just suddenly in your hand instead of in your holster. And then it was back in the holster."

"Right."

"Telekinesis," said the professor, almost reverently.

"Telewhat?"

"Telekinesis—the moving of material objects by mental force." The professor leaned back and studied the holstered gun. "It *must* be that. I hardly dared think it at first—the first time you did it. But the thought did occur to me. And now I'm virtually certain!"

"How do you say it?"

"T-e-l-e-k-i-n-e-s-i-s."

"Well, how do I *do* it?"

"I can't answer that. Nobody knows. It's been the subject of many experiments, and there are many reported happenings—

but I've never heard of any instance even remotely as impressive as this." The professor leaned across the table again. "Can you do it with other things, young man?"

"What other things?"

"That bottle on the bar, for example."

"Never tried."

"Try."

Buck stared at the bottle.

It wavered. Just a little. Rocked, and settled back.

Buck stared harder, eyes bulging.

The bottle shivered. That was all.

"Hell," Buck said. "I can't seem to—to get *ahold* of it with my mind, like I can with my gun."

"Try moving this glass on the table," the professor said. "It's smaller, and closer."

Buck stared at the glass. It moved a fraction of an inch across the tabletop. No more.

Buck snarled like a dog and swatted the glass with his hand, knocking it halfway across the room.

"Possibly," the professor said, after a moment, "you can do it with your gun because you *want* to so very badly. The strength of your desire releases—or creates—whatever psychic forces are necessary to perform the act." He paused, looking thoughtful. "Young man, suppose you try to transport your gun to—say, to the top of the bar."

"Why?" Buck asked suspiciously.

"I want to see whether distance is a factor where the gun is concerned. Whether you can place the gun that far away from you, or whether the power operates only when you want your gun in your hand."

"No," Buck said in an ugly voice. "Damn if I will. I'd maybe get my gun over there and not be able to get it back, and then you'd jump me—the two of you. I ain't minded to experiment around too much, thank you."

"All right," the professor said, as if he didn't care. "The suggestion was purely in the scientific spirit—"

"Sure," said Buck. "Sure. Just don't get any more scientific, or I'll experiment on how many holes you can get in you before you die."

The professor sat back in his chair and looked Buck right in the eye. After a second, Buck looked away, scowling.

Me, I hadn't said a word the whole while, and I wasn't talking now.

"Wonder where that goddam yellow-bellied sheriff is?" Buck said. He looked out the window, then glanced sharply at me. "He said he'd come, huh?"

"Yeah." When I was asked, I'd talk.

We sat in silence for a few moments.

The professor said, "Young man, you wouldn't care to come with me to San Francisco, would you? I and my colleagues would be very grateful for the opportunity to investigate this strange gift of yours—we would even be willing to pay you for your time and—"

Buck laughed. "Why, hell, I reckon I got bigger ideas'n that, mister! *Real* big ideas. There's no man alive I can't beat with a gun! I'm going to take Billy the Kid . . . Hickock . . . all of them! I'm going to get myself a rep bigger'n all theirs put together! Why, when I walk into a saloon, they'll hand me likker. I walk into a bank, they'll give me the place. No lawman from Canada to Mexico will even stay in the same town with me! Hell, what could *you* give me, you goddam little dude?"

The professor shrugged. "Nothing that would satisfy you."

"That's right." Suddenly Buck stiffened, looking out the window. He got up, his bulging blue eyes staring down at us. "Randolph's coming down the street! You two just stay put, and maybe—just maybe—I'll let you live. Perfessor, I wanta talk to you some more about this telekinesis stuff. Maybe I can get even faster than I am, or control my bullets better at long range. So you *be* here, get that?"

He turned and walked out the door.

The professor said, "He's not sane."

"Nutty as a locoed steer," I said. "Been that way for a long time. An ugly shrimp who hates everything—and now he's in the saddle holding the reins, and some people are due to get rode down." I looked curiously at him. "Look, professor—this telekinesis stuff—is all that on the level?"

"Absolutely."

"He just *thinks* his gun into his hand?"

"Exactly."

"Faster than anyone could ever draw it?"

"Inconceivably faster. The time element is almost non-existent."

I got up, feeling worse than I'd ever felt in my life. "Come on," I said. "Let's see what happens."

As if there was any doubt about what was bound to ahppen.

We stepped out onto the porch and over to the rail. Behind us, I heard Menner come out too. I looked over my shoulder. He'd wrapped a towel around his head. Blood was leaking through it. He was looking at Buck, hating him clear through.

The street was deserted except for Buck standing about twenty feet away, and, at the far end, Sheriff Ben Randolph

coming slowly toward him, putting one foot ahead of the other in the dust.

A few men were standing on porches, pressed back against the walls, mostly near doors. Nobody was sitting now—they were ready to groundhog if lead started flying wild.

"God damn it," I said in a low, savage voice. "Ben's too good a man to get kilt this way. By a punk kid with some crazy psychowhosis way of handling a gun."

I felt the professor's level eyes on me, and turned to look at him.

"Why," he said, "doesn't a group of you get together and face him down? Ten guns against his one. He'd have to surrender."

"No, he wouldn't," I said. "That ain't the way it works. He'd just dare any of us to be the first to try and stop him—and none of us would take him up on it. A group like that don't mean anything—it'd be each man against Buck Tarrant, and none of us good enough."

"I see," the professor said softly.

"God . . ." I clenched my fists so hard they hurt. "I wish we could think his gun right back into the holster or something!"

Ben and Buck were about forty feet apart now. Ben was coming on steadily, his hand over his gunbutt. He was a good man with a gun, Ben—nobody around these parts had dared tackle him for a long time. But he was outclassed now, and he knew it. I guess he was just hoping that Buck's first shot or two wouldn't kill him, and that he could place a good one himself before Buck let loose any more.

But Buck was a damn good shot. He just wouldn't miss.

The professor was staring at Buck with a strange look in his eyes.

"He should be stopped," he said.

"Stop him, then," I said sourly.

"After all," he mused, "if the ability to perform telekinesis lies dormant in all of us, and is released by strong faith and desire to accomplish something that can be accomplished only by that means—then our desire to stop him might be able to counter his desire to—"

"Damn you and your big words," I said bitterly.

"It was your idea," the professor said, still looking at Buck. "What you said about thinking his gun back into its holster—after all, we *are* two to his one—"

I turned around and stared at him, really hearing him for the first time. "Yeah, that's right—I said that! My God . . . do you think we could *do* it?"

"We can try," he said. "We know it *can* be done, and evidently that is nine-tenths of the battle. He can do it, so we should be able to. We must want him *not* to more than he *wants* to."

"Lord," I said. "I wonder. . . ."

Ben and Buck were about twenty feet apart now, and Ben stopped.

His voice was tired when he said, "Any time, Buck."

"You're a hell of a sheriff," Buck sneered. "You're a no-good bastard."

"Cuss me out," Ben said. "Don't hurt me none. I'll be ready when you start talking with guns."

"I'm ready now, beanpole," Buck grinned. "You draw first, huh?"

"*Think of his gun!*" the professor said in a fierce whisper. "Try to grab it with your mind—break his aim—pull it away from him—you know it *can be done!* *Think, think—*"

Ben Randolph had never in anyone's knowledge drawn first against a man. But now he did, and I guess nobody could blame him.

He slapped leather, his face already dead—and Buck's Peacemaker was in his hand—

And me and the professor were standing like statues on the porch of the Once Again, thinking at that gun, glaring at it, fists clenched, our breath rasping in our throats.

The gun appeared in Buck's hand, and wobbled just as he slipped hammer. The bullet sprayed dust at Ben's feet.

Ben's gun was halfway out.

Buck's gunbarrel pointed toward the ground, and he was trying to lift it so hard his hand got white. He drove a bullet into the dust at his own feet, and started to whine.

Ben's gun was up and aiming.

Buck shot himself in the foot.

Then Ben shot him once in the right elbow, once in the right shoulder. Buck screamed and dropped his gun and threw out his arms, and Ben, who was a thorough man, put a bullet through his right hand, and another one on top of it.

Buck sat in the dust and flapped blood all around, and bawled when we came to get him.

The professor and I told Ben Randolph what had happened, and nobody else. I think he believed us.

Buck spent two weeks in the town jail, and then a year in the state pen for pulling on Randolph, and nobody's seen him now for six years. Don't know what happened to him, or care much. I reckon he's working as a cowhand someplace—any-

way, he sends his mother money now and then, so he must have tamed down some and growed up some too.

While he was in the town jail, the professor talked to him a lot—the professor delayed his trip just to do it.

One night he told me, "Tarrant can't do anything like that again. Not at all, even with his left hand. The gunfight destroyed his faith in his ability to do it—or most of it, anyway. And I finished the job, I guess, asking all my questions. I guess you just can't think too much about that sort of thing."

The professor went on to San Francisco, where he's doing some interesting experiments. Or trying to. Because he has the memory of what happened that day—but, like Buck Tarrant, not the ability to do anything like that any more. He wrote me a couple times, and it seems that ever since that time he's been absolutely unable to do any telekinesis. He's tried a thousand times and can't even move a feather.

So he figures it was really me alone who saved Ben's life and stopped Buck in his tracks.

I wonder. Maybe the professor just knows too much not to be some skeptical, even with what he saw. Maybe the way he looks at things and tries to find reasons for them gets in the way of his faith.

Anyway, he wants me to come to San Francisco and get experimented on. Maybe someday I will. Might be fun, if I can find time off from my job.

I got a lot of faith, you see. What I see, I believe. And when Ben retired last year, I took over his job as sheriff—because I'm the fastest man with a gun in these parts. Or, actually, in the world. Probably if I wasn't the peaceable type, I'd be famous or something.

THE YOUNG ONE

OLD BUSTER WAS SUDDENLY CROUCHED ON STIFF LEGS, RIGHT up out of a sound sleep, and his ears were laid back flat against his head, and he was letting out the deep, wet-sounding growl he always used on rattlers.

Young Johnny Stevens looked up in surprise.

The new kid was standing out in the middle of the road, about ten feet away. He'd come up so silently Johnny hadn't even known he was there—until old Buster let out that growl.

Johnny stopped whittling. He sat there on the damp, tree-

shaded grass in front of the Stevens farmhouse, his big silver-mounted hunting knife in one hand, the shaved stick in the other, and stared at old Buster.

The dog's head was down, his eyes were up and slitted on the new kid. His lips were curled back tight against his teeth.

Johnny started to reach for Buster's scruff, afraid he was getting set to attack. But Buster gave him a mean, panicky, sideways glance, and Johnny pulled back his hand, because he knew his dog. Then Buster whined. His tail went between his legs and he started to walk backward, one slow step after another. He emerged from the shade of the big elm, where he'd been sleeping at Johnny's feet ever since lunch, and kept going backward until he was about twenty feet up the lawn toward the house. Then he stopped and threw back his head as if to howl—but he didn't. He held the pose for a second, his eyes glaring on the new kid down along the sides of his muzzle, and then he turned and ran around the corner of the house.

Buster had never even run from bear. Johnny had once had to drag him off the scent of one.

Johnny turned to look at the new kid, mad clear through and curious as heck at the same time.

The kid looked friendly, curious—and kind of lost. He was dark and thin, with big eyes. His short, stiff, black hair fit his long skull like a cap. His voice had a funny accent, and it was kind of hesitant, almost like he was afraid to talk.

"Hello," he said.

Johnny Stevens stood up. Woodshavings spilled off his lap onto the grass.

"What'd you do to Buster?" he demanded.

"I—I don't know. Dogs just don't like me. I'm sorry I frightened him."

Johnny scowled. "You didn't frighten him," he denied formally. "He musta seen something across the road."

"It was me," said the new kid softly.

Johnny turned to look at the corner of the house. Buster was poking his head around, low down, ears still back. The new kid looked over that way too, and Buster ducked out of sight like he was yanked. A second later Johnny heard the dog's claws gallop across the cellar door along the side of the house, and knew Buster must be heading for the field out back, where he went and hid whenever he was punished.

Johnny scowled harder. "Who're you?"

"Kovacs. Hello."

Johnny didn't answer—just stared suspiciously.

"What are you making?" Kovacs asked, after a minute.

"I dunno," Johnny said. Then, because that didn't sound

smart, he added, "A cane, maybe. Or a fishing rod. Kovacs what?"

"Bela."

"That's a funny name."

"What is yours?"

"Johnny Stevens."

"Hello, Johnny," Kovacs Bela said again, hopefully.

"Hello," Johnny said sourly.

Kovacs Bela came to the edge of the road, where it gave onto a slope of rock and root-studded dirt that rose a few feet to the Stevens lawn. There he stopped, his thin shadow lying up the slope in front of him, as if he were waiting to be invited.

Johnny sat down again, still scowling. He didn't say anything.

Kovacs half-turned, looking down the road over his shoulder, as if sorry he'd stopped.

They watched a couple of robins chase each other through the sun-bleached rails of the fence across the road. Summer heat danced along the waving tips of wheat in the field beyond, and shimmered up the green-brown sides of the low hillocks that lined the old creek-bed.

Johnny started whittling again.

"You from that new family who bought the old Burman place?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Moved in last week, din'cha? I heard about it."

"Yes."

The robins tired of darting through the fence-rails and set off across the wheatfield, wings blurring, bodies almost brushing the carpet of tips.

"We played around there a lot," Johnny grunted. "The Burman place. Guess we can't now . . . 'cause you moved in."

Kovacs Bela was silent.

"We used the silo for a robber hideout," Johnny said accusingly.

"Silo. . . ?"

"Don't you know what that is?"

Kovacs shook his dark head.

"It's the big round building, like a tin can. You're kinda dumb."

Kovacs bit his lip and stood silently, his big, dark eyes unhappy. "Do you want me to go away?" he asked.

"Sure," said Johnny, still feeling mean.

Kovacs started to turn away, with that aimless look to his movements that means one is going no place in particular—just leaving.

Johnny relented a little. "I was just kiddin' . . . c'mon and sit down."

Kovacs Bela stood for a moment, then smiled hesitantly and came up the dirt slope into the shade of the trees. He sank to the grass and curled his legs under him with an oddly graceful motion. "Thank you," he said.

Johnny peeled a long sliver of bark off the stick with his big, razor-sharp knife. "I wanna know what you did to Buster. How'd you make him act that way?"

"Animals just don't like me."

"Why?"

"My father once said it is the way we sme . . ." Kovacs' voice trailed off. "I don't know. They don't like us."

"Us? You mean your whole family?"

"I—yes."

"You're a funny guy. Where you from, they don't have silos? You talk funny too."

"I am from Hungary."

Johnny looked closely at Kovacs Bela, taking in the dark features, the big eyes, the soft mouth. There was something about the face that disturbed him, but he couldn't pin it down.

"Where's Hungry?" he asked.

"In Europe."

"Oh . . . a foreigner. I guess Buster never saw a foreigner before."

The two robins, or another pair, came hedgehopping back over the wheatfield, arced up over the fence, over the road and into the uppermost branches of the tree directly overhead. They set up a loud chirping, and commenced flitting from branch to branch.

"Where are you from?" Kovacs Bela asked.

"Right here. Michigan." Johnny thought for a second, balancing his big knife on one finger, the heavy blade on one side, the silver-mounted handle on the other. "There's Bela Lugosi in the movies. He's always a monster or something. But Bela's his *first* name."

"It is my first name too. In Hungary, the first name comes last. I should have said my name is Bela Kovacs . . . that is the way you would say it here."

Johnny shook his head, as if wondering at the crazy things foreigners did—and the crazy way they must smell, to wake old Buster up and send him kiting the way he had.

Without being obvious about it, he tried to get a whiff of Bela Kovacs—but he couldn't smell a thing. Well, dogs could smell lots more than people. Old Buster sure must have.

Bela Kovacs had noticed the headshake. He said a little defensively, "I talk English well, don't I?"

Johnny started to deprecate; but he said instead, honestly, "Yeah. I gotta admit, you talk pretty good."

"We have been in America for almost a year. In New York. And my father taught English to me and my mother before we came."

Johnny was working up considerable interest in his first foreigner. "You mean your father's English?"

"He is Hungarian. He had to teach himself first. It took him a long time. But he said we had to move, and America was the best place for us to go. We brought over some paintings, and my father sold them to buy the farm."

"Your father paints pitchers?"

"My grandfather painted them. He was a famous artist in Hungary."

"What d'you mean, you *had* to move?"

"We . . . we just had to. We had to move to a new country. That's what Father said." Bela Kovacs looked around at the blue summer sky, the heat-shimmering hillocks, the groves of trees that lay along the landscape like clean green cushions, the dusty road that wound through low hills to Harrisville thirty miles to the east. "I am glad we finally moved out here. I did not like New York. In Hungary, we lived in the country."

The two robins had been hopping lower and lower in the tree overhead, and now they dropped side by side from the bottom branches to the lawn, where they began searching the thick grass for insects.

One hopped to within a few feet of Bela Kovacs, who still sat with his legs curled under him in that relaxed yet curiously steel-spring position.

Suddenly the robin froze—cocked its head—regarded the boy with a startled beady eye.

Then it chirped a thin note, and both birds streaked away across the lawn as fast as they could go.

Johnny stared after them.

"I like birds," Bela Kovacs said wistfully. "I would not hurt them. I wish they liked me. I wish animals did not hate us."

Johnny began to work up even more interest in his first foreigner—because maybe it wasn't the way he smelled after all.

Because birds could hardly smell anything.

Then he noticed something funny. Bela Kovacs was still looking at the place where the robins had vanished, and Johnny saw what it was that had disturbed him about Bela's face ever since he'd first seen it.

"You have funny eyebrows," he said. "They're awful thick, and they meet in the middle. They grow all the way across."

Bela didn't look at him. The remark seemed to have brought

back his shyness. He lowered his head and raised one slender hand to the side of his face, as if wanting to conceal the eyebrows.

After a second, Johnny was sorry he'd said anything.

"Heck, that's okay," he said. "Look—I haven't got any end on this finger." He held up the pinkie he'd caught in the wheel on the well two years ago.

Bela Kovacs stared at the smooth pink end and his straight bar of brows rose at the outsides.

"We're all different," Johnny said—and realized that, curiously, where he had before been teasing this new kid, he was now trying almost to console him. And he wondered more than ever what could be wrong with Bela Kovacs, to make him act so funny. Guilty, almost—like he was ashamed of something—something he was maybe afraid people would find out.

Bela was sitting in the same position, but somehow he seemed smaller than before, like he was huddled into himself. His hand was still up to his face.

"We're all different," Johnny said again. "My dad always tells me that . . . and he says it doesn't matter. He says for me never to care where anybody comes from, or how funny they look, or anything like that. That's why I don't mind you being a foreigner. I'm sorry Buster acted the way he did."

Bela Kovacs said muffledly, "I'm *so* different."

"Naw."

"I am." Bela looked at Johnny's finger. "I was *born* different."

"Naw," Johnny said again, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. Heck, he knew Bela Kovacs *was* different—anybody could see that. And he was itching to know what the mystery was all about.

He said uncomfortably, "Want to hike or something?"

"Hike?"

"Go walking." Johnny stood up and shoved the hunting knife in his belt. "C'mon, Bela. There's lots of swell places to play—I'll show 'em to you. There's the hollow tree, and the injun fort, and—"

"A real Indian fort?" Bela said, looking up finally, dark eyes wide.

"Naw. We built it outa rocks. And there's the caves, back in the hills . . . miles of 'em. You go in through a little chink that don't look like nothin' at all, and then you flash your light around and there's walls that look like waving cloth, all pink and green and blue, and secret passages and stalatites and stagmites and holes where you can't even see the bottom they're so deep."

"That sounds wonderful," Bela Kovacs said. "Will you take me there, Johnny?"

"Sure. C'mon, I'll pick up my flashlight." Johnny started up the lawn toward the house.

Bela rose gracefully to his feet, as if the steel-spring had suddenly uncoiled, and walked a few steps after Johnny. Then he stopped and looked up at the high summer sun.

"What is the time?" he asked.

"Oh . . . 'bout three o'clock, I guess."

"Is it far—to the caves?"

"Two, three miles."

Bela looked at the grass at his feet. "I have to be home by seven o'clock."

"We can make it easy. C'mon." Johnny started off again.

Bela fell into step. "Johnny—"

"Yeah?"

"I *have* to be home by seven."

"Why?"

"I—I just have to. My parents will be terribly angry if I'm not. We will not get lost, or go too far away, will we?"

"Heck, no. I know the caves better'n anybody." Johnny glanced sideways at Bela. "Won't your parents let you play at night? *Mine* do."

"It's—only on certain days that I can't go out at night. Certain times of the month."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you. But I have to be home by seven."

Johnny was intrigued by this new addition to the mystery. "Don't worry," he said. "Nothing'll happen."

They reached the front porch.

"Wait here," said Johnny.

He went into the house and into the kitchen, where Mom was already working on supper, because the Youngs were coming over for bridge tonight and supper was always something special for guests.

Johnny got his flashlight from under the sink.

Mom looked up from the chicken she was stuffing. "What are you doing, dear?"

"Goin' to the caves."

Mom frowned. "I wish you'd stay away from that place, Johnny. I wish your father would do something to make you. It's so dangerous . . . they go on for miles. Suppose you got lost sometime?"

"I won't get lost," Johnny said contemptuously. "I know every inch."

"Suppose the flashlight failed?"

"Aw, Mom, don't worry . . . I'm just going to show the new kid around."

"The new kid?"

"Bela Kovacs . . . his family bought the old Burman place."

Mom looked surprised, and a little pleased. "So they have a little boy! Now you'll have a new playmate. Is he a nice boy?"

Johnny juggled the flashlight. "Well, he's kinda funny. He's a foreigner from Hungry. That's in Europe. I guess he's all right."

"I'd like to meet him."

"He's right outside waitin' . . . c'mon, I'll interduce you."

Johnny started through the house toward the porch where he'd left Bela. Mom smiled and wiped her hands on a towel and followed.

They were just passing through the front room when they heard old Buster barking and snarling like he'd gone crazy.

Buster had Bela Kovacs backed against the porch steps, and was snaking back and forth in front of the boy as if he wanted to attack worse than anything else in the world, but was afraid to.

Bela's dark face had gone bone-colored, and he was half-crouched in an almost animal position, looking ready to move instantly in any direction, including straight up.

Johnny Stevens dropped over the porch-rail and lit beside Bela and shouted, "Buster! Cut it out! *Stop* it!"

Old Buster looked at him with the red-lamp eyes of a mad dog. Watery froth dripped from his stretched lips. His tail was curled so hard between his legs that it pressed up along his belly. He trembled so hard he could hardly stand—but Johnny knew that scared or not, Buster was set to attack any second.

Johnny hissed and clapped his hands in front of him, hard and fast. That meant Buster had better git, or end up with a sore rump.

Buster took a prowling, back-high, head-low step forward. His lips were so curled that his head seemed half teeth.

Mom screamed from the porch, "Johnny, come away!" and Johnny turned his head frantically to look at her, and Buster chose that moment to charge Bela Kovacs.

Then everything happened almost too fast to see.

Johnny felt a tug at his belt, where he'd stuck the hunting knife, and saw Bela Kovacs swing the heavy blade at Buster's head.

Old Buster lost heart, and turned and ran again, howling his heart out.

Bela Kovacs screamed, "*Silver . . . the knife is silver!*" and he dropped the knife and ran off across the lawn, crying and

flapping the hand he'd grabbed the knife-handle with. He turned and ran down the road, faster than Johnny had ever seen a kid run.

Johnny's mother was off the porch and on her knees, frantically examining Johnny to see if he'd been bitten; and Johnny's father drove up just then in the station-wagon, craned his neck after Bela Kovacs, and asked what in hell was going on.

After supper, the grownups sat around and talked about the new family before starting to play bridge.

Everybody who had met either Mr. or Mrs. Kovacs seemed to like them all right—that was the consensus. Mrs. Young said that McIntyre, the grocer, who was generally looked up to as a pretty good judge of character, had let it be known yesterday that Mr. Kovacs had impressed him favorably. Mr. Kovacs had come in to stock up on food and some implements and McIntyre had tried to pump him, and Mr. Kovacs had answered the right questions and resisted the rest pleasantly, and McIntyre had liked that.

And Mrs. Kovacs had waited outside the store in the Kovacs' '42 Dodge, and three townsladies said she looked like a nice woman, if a little foreign-looking.

And Junior Murdock, at the gas-station, said that the Kovacs Dodge was in very good shape for its age, and showed signs of recent careful overhauling—and Murdoch liked people who cared for their cars, particularly old cars that someone else might lose pride in. He thought it told a lot about them.

Nobody thought them too strange, it seemed—just foreign.

Mrs. Young and Johnny's Mom decided, on the basis of the evidence, to suggest at the next meeting of the Ladies' Club that Mrs. Kovacs be invited to join.

Then the talk got around to what had happened this afternoon.

Old Buster had come back around five o'clock, sneaking out of his hideaway in the field and looking around each time before he put his paw down for a step.

While Mom and Johnny had stayed inside and watched through the front window, and Johnny had blinked back tears of worry, Dad had gone out with his pistol in one hand and coaxed Buster over to him and, with the gun to the animal's head, examined him carefully. Dad knew a lot about animals.

Old Buster wagged his tail and took a couple of laps out of the pan of water Dad carried in his other hand.

Dad came back and said, "He's okay. I don't know what got into him. There are some people animals just hate, and I

guess the Kovacs boy is one of them. It's nothing against him . . . from what Johnny says, he likes animals himself. They just don't like *him*."

"He tried to kill Buster," Johnny said. He'd been mad about that all afternoon. "He took my knife and tried to kill Buster."

Dad said, "You shouldn't be angry about that, Johnny. It was an instinctive thing to do . . . the kid was probably scared silly. Buster was out for blood, God knows why, and Bela grabbed the knife and took a swipe in self-defense. He's probably sorry he did it."

"I don't care," Johnny said sullenly. "He tried to kill him."

Dad sighed. "It's just lucky that Buster saw the knife and lit out—and that Bela missed with the knife. Bela didn't get bitten, and Buster's all right."

"It wasn't the knife," Johnny said. "Buster ain't scared of my knife. He was scared of *Bela* . . . he ran before he even saw the knife."

"Well," Dad said, "maybe. Anyway, everything's all right now. Nothing really bad happened." He paused. "You know, I feel a little sorry for the kid . . . animals hating him like that. No wonder he acts a little strange. A kid ought to be able to have a pet. Maybe he feels a little inferior to kids who can."

But Johnny was still mad. After Dad finished talking to him, he was less mad than before—but he still resented anyone taking a knife to his dog. No matter what the provocation. And *his* knife to boot!

"I wonder why he dropped the knife and ran," Mom mused. "He yelled that it was silver, and acted like it burned his hand."

"Oh," Dad said, "he probably said 'sliver.' Maybe he got a sliver from the knife handle."

Johnny started to object, but let it go. His knife handle was of smooth, worn, hard wood and silver strips—he knew darned well there weren't any slivers on it. But still, he let it go. He'd settle the whole thing in his own way.

When Dad suggested that he go over the next day and apologize to Bela Kovacs for Buster's behavior, and show the new boy that nobody held his actions against him, Johnny said all right.

Because, though he knew Dad was absolutely right and it hadn't been Bela's fault, he still wanted to get back at Bela for trying to kill Buster—and he had a good idea of how to do it.

He'd scare the living daylight out of the kid—and maybe find out what the mysterious reason was why Bela had to be home every night by that time at certain times of the month.

The grownups finally started their bridge game, and Johnny went outside and sat on the porch with Buster and looked

up at the big, yellow full moon that rode the night sky like a spotlight.

Buster had spent the last two hours prowling around the lawn, smelling everyplace where Bela Kovacs had walked, growling deep in his throat and every so often letting out a scared-sounding howl.

Now Johnny scratched Buster's ears, and thought about tomorrow.

It was a good idea. He'd scare Bela spitless—and then tell him why he'd done it and make friends with him again. Because Bela really wasn't a bad guy . . . he was just a little queer.

The next day Johnny took his flashlight and went over to the old Burman place around three o'clock. He went cross-country instead of down the road, and as he came out of the weed-grown cornfield that old Burman had once tended so lovingly, he saw Bela Kovacs playing in the yard by the wind-mill.

When Bela saw him, he stood stock-still, dark eyes wide, again with that animal look to him, as if he were ready to run.

Johnny said, "I came over to say I'm sorry Buster tried to bite you."

"Oh." Bela blinked. He had his hands cupped in front of him, about belt-level.

Johnny waited for Bela to say something else, but he didn't. Johnny looked curiously at Bela's cupped hands. "What you got?" he asked.

Bela's mouth twisted. He lifted the top hand, and Johnny saw that he held a mouse. It was curled into a ball, and its mouth hung wide open—but Johnny noticed it wasn't trying to bite its way loose. Tiny black eyes glittered up in terror.

"I caught it," Bela said. "In the barn."

"What d'you want to catch a *mouse* for?" Johnny said disgustedly. "Why not get a cat?"

Bela blinked again, and Johnny suddenly wondered if Bela hadn't been just about to cry or something, before Johnny showed up, and if he wasn't holding it back now.

"I wanted to make friends with it," Bela said softly. "But it is no different in America. All the animals hate me—fear me."

"Heck, any mouse'd be scared, caught and held that way."

"Not this frightened." Bela knelt and gently placed the mouse on the ground. For a second it stayed there, a huddled gray ball—then legs erupted and it bounded off so fast that halfway to the barn it tripped and rolled over twice, and when it reached a gap between two boards in the side of the barn, it

bounced off hard because of bad aim. Then it vanished, hind legs scrabbling.

"See?" said Bela. "It runs in terror. So would a cat. I have never had a pet." He straightened and gave Johnny his shy, lonely smile. "I am sorry about yesterday too, Johnny. I am sorry I tried to hurt your dog. I did not mean—"

"Aw," Johnny said uncomfortably, remembering how Dad had felt sorry for Bela last night—and remembering what he planned to do today in the caves. "Aw . . . forget it."

Bela took Johnny into the farmhouse to meet his parents.

Mr. Kovacs was a big, handsome, middle-aged man who moved the same smooth way Bela did. And Mrs. Kovacs moved that way too—Johnny noticed it the instant he came through the front door into the living room, for Bela's parents had just been finishing their lunch, and when they saw Johnny come in, they rose from the table with Old World courtesy. And with that strange animal grace.

"Father and Mother," said Bela, "this is Johnny Stevens, the boy I met yesterday."

Mr. Kovacs took Johnny's hand and shook it firmly and gently—and Johnny could tell, from the size of Mr. Kovacs' hand and the hard feel of its palm against his own, that Mr. Kovacs was very, very strong.

And a funny thing—when Johnny took his hand away, the ends of his fingers rubbed against something sort of bristly in Mr. Kovacs' hard palm. It felt almost like Dad's cheek, just after he shaved—like short whisker stubble.

But that was silly. Nobody had hair on their palms. He'd probably just felt dried skin peeling away from work cal-louses . . .

Mrs. Kovacs, a slim, pretty woman, nodded pleasantly and said, with an accent much more pronounced than Bela's, "How do you do, Mr. Stevens."

Johnny swelled a little. It was the first time anyone had ever called him Mr. Stevens.

"I'm pleased to meet you," he said.

"Bela has told us what happened yesterday," Mr. Kovacs said. "Please, may we add our apologies to his? It is unfortunate—but animals just do not like us. It is a peculiarity of our family."

"Heck," Johnny said. "I came over to apologize. And to play with Bela."

Mrs. Kovacs smiled and said almost exactly what Johnny's mother had said the day before: "How nice . . . for Bela to have such a nice boy his own age to play with."

It was Johnny's turn to smile shyly. He looked away, and for the first time got a look at the inside of the Kovacs home.

The last time he'd been in this house, about three weeks ago, it had been bare walls and refuse-cluttered floors. Now there was furniture—mostly ordinary stuff. But there were some things—the round table in the middle of the room, for instance, and that big bookcase-desk against the wall—that were pretty foreign-looking. And the pictures—most of them were in fancier, heavier frames than any he'd ever seen, and a lot of them were of funny foreign buildings. And the tablecloth, and the candlesticks and lamps and the rug—oh, lots of the smaller things around the room had a foreign look. A sort of solid, warm, old look.

Mr. Kovacs, noting Johnny's interest, said in a deep bass voice. "We brought many of our things from Hungary."

"It looks nice," Johnny said.

"Thank you," said Mr. Kovacs gravely.

Mrs. Kovacs commenced to clear the table, and Johnny glanced casually at the plates . . . and when he saw what the lunch had consisted of, his jaw sagged and he looked again.

Raw meat. A roast of beef, it looked like—except it wasn't roasted. And nothing else. A big platter of red, blood-juicy beef in the middle of the table, three red-stained plates at the chair-places, glasses and a pitcher of water.

Again Mr. Kovacs noted Johnny's interest. Or his amazement.

"Raw meat," he said, a little heavily, "is good for the blood. We eat raw beefsteak once or twice a week, young man."

"Oh," said Johnny, trying not to stare so hard. "I guess I read about that someplace myself—'bout raw meat being good for you. But I don't think . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You do not think you would like it," Mrs. Kovacs smiled, picking up the plates. "But you are too polite to say so."

Johnny nodded uncomfortably.

"Now," said Mr. Kovacs, "come here, young man."

Johnny moved to stand before the man's chair. He didn't know exactly why—except that he felt somehow that Mr. Kovacs was a friendly man.

Mr. Kovacs looked appreciatively—almost critically—at Johnny's well-muscled arms and firm neck and clear eyes. "You are in good health," he said.

"I—I guess so."

"You will make a good playmate for our Bela," Mr. Kovacs said. "He is very active. Do you know the country here?"

"I've lived here all my life."

"Good. You will tell Bela of any dangers that exist, yes?"

"Sure."

"Good. Now, Bela, why don't you show your new friend around the house?"

Mrs. Kovacs began to remove the platter of raw beef. Mr. Kovacs reached out and took one of the remaining chunks and bit into it with teeth that, when he opened his mouth wide, were startlingly long and white and, from the way the meat tore, sharp.

He chewed and looked at Johnny again, a little reflectively. Johnny and Bela were over by the bookcase by the stairs—Bela was showing Johnny what Hungarian writing looked like.

Mrs. Kovacs looked too, and her large eyes—now they were almost luminous—traveled up and down Johnny's body, along the muscular arms and legs, dwelt on the tanned throat. She licked her lips.

"In the old country . . ." she sighed in Hungarian.

"Eva," said Mr. Kovacs, softly but warningly, also in Hungarian.

"Ah, *imadot* Ferenc, I am only thinking. But *look* at him . . ."

Mr. Kovacs smiled at the expression on her face. "Sh-h, now, Eva. We have left all that behind . . . it is best not even to think."

"*Sajnos* . . ." Mrs. Kovacs picked up a small piece of beef and bit into it with teeth as long and sharp as her husband's. She sighed again. "A new country, a new life . . . I know, my dear."

"You are unhappy, Eva?"

"Unhappy?" Eva Kovacs smiled down at him, and since her lower lip concealed the points of her teeth, it was quite a pleasant smile. "Only my belly suffers. I am happy that we are safe, Ferenc."

He took her hand and pressed it against his shoulder. "The old country, the old life . . . it is impossible to live that way any longer, Eva. We are known. Not you, perhaps, nor I, nor little Bela, but *we* . . . all of us . . . known by signs familiar to the smallest child. While here—here they do not know us, or even believe in us—and we must let it remain so. We must forsake the old ways."

"You are not disappointed in America, then."

He shook his massive head. "America is best, in every way. There is no tradition to expose us. The political situation is good. And living conditions, and opportunity. No, mamma, I am well content here—except—" he put his big hands palms-up on the table before him and flexed them and then slowly made fists around the clean-shaven stubble on the palms—"except at this time of the month, when the moon turns her full face to us . . ."

"Yes," said Eva Kovacs softly. "Yes."

"But beef does not taste so bad my dear. Not so bad, at least, as a silver bullet."

Mrs. Kovacs popped the last of the beef into her mouth, chewed powerfully, and swallowed. She seemed to be tasting it in her throat, feeling it, almost analyzing it as it went toward her stomach. "No," she said slowly. "Once you are used to it, it is not bad. But—"

"Do not think about it, Eva."

"We cannot even chase the cow," she said softly. "We must go and buy—"

"I know."

Mrs. Kovacs looked across the room again at Johnny Stevens, and her large eyes grew larger.

"Eva," Mr. Kovacs said, a little sharply. "You would not think of—"

"No, no," she said, and licked blood from fingers which seemed to have grown just a little hairier, and the nails a little longer. "Of course not, *imadot* Ferenc. It is just when I remember . . ."

"We must forget."

"And they are so *healthy* here . . ."

"We must never *change* again, Eva. Never."

"And Bela?"

Ferenc Kovacs sighed. "He is too young yet—too young to know. We must be sure that he is always with us when he *changes*. Soon he will be old enough to control the *change*, as we do—then we must worry no longer in our new home."

Bela had been showing Johnny his room, which held an old posterbed, a very old maple bureau, and a carved chest full of fascinating toys such as Johnny had never seen before.

Now the boys came back to the living room, and Bela said, "Mother, we are going out to play."

"All right, Bela. But remember—come home before seven o'clock."

"Yes, mamma."

"You know what time of the month this is, don't you?"

"Yes, mamma." Bela looked uncomfortably at Johnny. "I will be back."

"You *must*," said Mr. Kovacs. "Just as you did in New York. You know why, Bela . . ." He turned to Johnny. "You will not keep our Bela out late, will you? You see—he is not well . . . that is why it is very important that he return home before nightfall."

"Oh," said Johnny. "I'll be careful. I mean, I'll—I won't—" And he looked away in confusion, thinking of what he planned to do in the cave.

Mr. Kovacs' big eyes were still on his face when he looked

up, and Johnny felt they were looking right through his own eyes at the inside of his skull.

"I think," said Mr. Kovacs, "that you had better be."

Bela's parents came to the door and stood in the sunshine, and as Johnny and Bela turned to wave at them from the edge of the cornfield, Johnny noticed for the first time that their eyebrows were just like Bela's—straight, thick bars of hair that ran right across their foreheads.

The entrance to the caves was just a black chink in the rocks on the hillside. They climbed up toward it, leaping from one big boulder to the next under the afternoon sun.

They reached the black hole, and felt the coolness of it on their faces, even in the sunshine.

Bela hung back when Johnny started to go right in.

"Johnny . . ." he said.

"Yeah?"

"Don't forget . . . I *have* to be back before seven."

Johnny put his hands on his hips. "Well, f'gosh sakes, yes! I heard it enough. What's so awful that'll happen to you if you don't? D'you have to take medicine or something?"

Bela shook his head. "I can't tell you. But—you won't get lost or anything, will you?"

"No," said Johnny emphatically, crossing his fingers behind his back.

"You heard what my parents said . . . I have to be home before the moon rises."

"The *moon*! What's the moon got to do with it?"

Bela just looked nervously at the black hole in the hillside.

And Johnny didn't ask about it again. He just sniffed. "The moon, f'gosh sakes!" as if he were dismissing it as something else crazy that foreigners—especially Hungarians—worried about. Because he knew he had a better way of finding out.

"Johnny . . . perhaps I had better not go in. Not now."

Johnny put a jeer in his voice. "Scared?"

"Not for the reasons you think," Bela said, dark eyes flashing. "You do not understand."

"Well, come on, then . . . I promise—" the crossed fingers again—"I won't get lost."

Johnny started again into the black chink. Bela hesitated for a second, and then followed.

Actually, Johnny thought as they made their way through the narrow fissure into increasing darkness, the crossed fingers weren't necessary—because he wasn't planning to really get lost; only to *pretend* to get lost.

And he wasn't sure he was going to do even that, now—not if Bela was *sick*. That was different. Maybe it explained a

lot—even old Buster's behavior. Dogs sometimes got funny around sick people.

But he wasn't sure that that *was* the explanation. It sounded a little fishy to him. Why all the mystery, if Bela was just sick? Or was it some awful-to-gosh disease? If so, why was Bela let out to play and maybe give the disease to someone else? And Mr. Kovacs had said that Bela was very active. That didn't sound like he was sick. And Bela sure didn't look sick.

Johnny decided he'd wait and decide what to do later.

The floor of the chink dipped down, and turned at a right angle, and they were inside the caves.

Johnny turned on his flashlight. And heard Bela gasp.

All around them were curtains and draperies and carpets and fountains of stone—gray, pink, blue, green, lavender, stretching from where they stood to a sharp sixty-foot downslope ahead of them, which led to the cave floor below and off into inky shadows that looked almost like solids.

Johnny played the beam of light around, giving Bela a good look at everything worth seeing here near the entrance. Then he said, "Let's start down."

They made their way across ripples of pastel-shaded stone to where the downslope began. The sounds they made started to echo, and the air was very dry and cool.

The beam of the flashlight was hard and bright, and the blackness pressed in on it as if trying to squash it down to pencil-thinness—but the beam moved like lightning, cutting like a knife, and wherever it opened the blackness it revealed wonders of color and shape.

"The waves in the slope make steps," Johnny said, pointing the light downward. "See? We can go down that way. How do you like it?"

"It is beautiful," Bela whispered.

They started down, Johnny keeping the light always on their footing and guiding their progress down the face of rock by familiar rippling formations and splashes of color.

At last they reached the bottom, and Johnny said, "This way."

As they started across the uneven floor of the cave, Bela asked, "Do you know the time, Johnny?"

"'Bout four . . . you got lotsa time."

And soon the caves became so beautiful that Bela forgot entirely to worry about the time.

They passed fountains and sprays and mists and museums of stone, gleaming with colors purer and more delicate than any ever seen on Earth's surface. They passed marching stalagmites of green and blue and bright orange, here and there united with drooping stalactites to form arching passageways

and gardens of pillars. They moved slowly beneath walls of rippled stone, as if blue or pink or purple lava had been frozen in midflow.

They passed lakes of blue-black water, so still and smooth that one had almost to touch them to be convinced that they weren't glass.

They moved up vast slopes of colored stone like insects up a giant Christmas tree ornament, and when they reached the top, Johnny would select this dark passage or that and lead them on into royal chambers of purple and white, and then up a curving crimson staircase to a balcony of coral pink and green where more passages offered further mysteries to be explored.

They moved along the edges of crevices so deep that a penny dropped made no sound—not even the whisper of an echo.

Once Johnny turned off his light and told Bela to stand still, and they listened to the silence which can not be qualified, the silence which is absolute—the silence that exists only underground.

They heard their own hearts beating.

At last Johnny was sure the time must be about six o'clock.

"We'd better get started back," he told Bela. "If you're going to get home by seven. This way."

And he led the way back to the place where they had entered the caves. And there he pretended to get lost.

It was easy. Bela was new to the caves. He probably wouldn't recognize the entrance even if Johnny flashed his light up the long slope right to the chink where they'd come in.

Johnny wasn't sure yet whether he wanted to keep up the pretense for more than a few minutes—maybe he'd just throw a short scare into Bela, and then take him on out of the caves so he could go home by seven. After all, if Bela was sick . . .

But he wasn't sure about that. It still sounded fishy. And he was more curious than ever to know what the mystery was all about—even if it *was* some kind of disease.

He said worriedly, "Bela . . . I—I'm not sure which way we go from here. I think maybe I'm lost . . ."

And he looked to see what effect it would have on the Hungarian boy.

Bela's eyes grew huge. "Oh, *no* . . . Johnny, you do not mean it! You *promised!*"

John pretended to be confused—even afraid. "I—I'm sorry," he stammered. "I just lost the way. I was so interested showing you around. Gosh, Bela—"

"But, Johnny, I *have* to get out. I have to get home before . . ."

"Come on," Johnny said, making his voice worried. "Maybe—maybe it's this way."

And he led Bela in a huge circle through the pillars and passages and hanging stone curtains that surrounded the entrance. It took about half an hour, and then they were right back where they'd started from—within a hundred feet of the entrance.

Johnny said, "I just don't know where we *are*!"

"What time do you think it is?" Bela asked, his voice terrified.

"Six thirty, about."

Bela shuddered and looked at Johnny, his eyes shining enormously in the light. "Johnny, I have to get *out* . . ."

Johnny put panic in his voice. "Well, what can I do? I'm sorry! I'm scared too! Maybe we'll *never* get out!"

"Try," Bela begged. "Try, Johnny . . . can't you remember the way?"

Looking at Bela in the light, at the big dark eyes and smooth brown skin and white straight teeth and lithe body, Johnny decided abruptly that the story about Bela's being sick must be phony. It was something *else* . . . there was some other reason why Bela was so frantic about being home by seven, and why his parents were so emphatic on the same point. Some real strange, funny reason—and Johnny wanted to know what.

He decided to do as he'd originally planned—keep Bela down here and watch to see what happened.

He turned around as if in indecision. "I think—I think maybe it's off this way. Come on!"

And he led Bela in a circle the other way around, by a slightly different route, and they ended up by the entrance again.

Johnny knew it must be nearly seven by now. He kept a sharp eye on Bela while pretending to search for the entrance chink that was really right up the slope over their heads.

Would Bela know, somehow, when seven o'clock had arrived? And was it something that would happen to him right at seven that he was afraid of? But how could he know the time? . . . and what could happen down here in the caves? Or was it something his parents would do to him later, as punishment for not getting home by that time?

"Johnny!" Bela said suddenly, close by Johnny in the blackness, a quaver in his voice.

Johnny stopped his pretense of searching, and put the beam of light on Bela. "Yeah?"

Bela was trembling all over, and he was looking up at the roof of the cave. As Johnny watched, he hunched his shoulders a little—sort of cringed—and his face got even tighter, as if he saw something horrible coming at him right down through the blackness, the solid rock.

"It is almost seven . . . Johnny . . . *do something* . . . it is going to *happen!*"

"What's going to happen? *What* can I do?"

"I do not know," Bela cried, and echoes came back, *I do not know, do not know* . . .

"You don't know what I can do?"

"I do not know . . ." . . . *do notknow, notknow, know, know* . . .

"You don't know what's going to happen?"

"I do not know! I am frightened . . . it never happened to me away from home before . . . Johnny, you *promised* . . . ah, mamma, mamma, *mamma*—" and Bela began to cry. He sank to a heap on the colored stone floor, and tears rolled down his cheeks and splashed on the stone and made the colors deeper, and he wailed things in Hungarian until he could hardly talk any more but just cried.

"You don't know what's going to happen?" Johnny asked, amazed.

Bela choked trying to talk, and coughed hard, and the echoes came back like footsteps across his frantic voice. "Yes, I know—but I do not know what it is, or why, it just *happens* . . . ah, mamma, *mamma* . . ."

Suddenly his back stiffened, and his hands clawed out in front of him. His streaming eyes rolled up to Johnny's face. He whined like an animal. "Johnny . . . it is seven . . . the moon is rising . . . I can feel it . . ."

"*Feel* the moon? Down *here*? How can—"

"It does not matter where . . . I can *feel* it . . . I can feel . . . mamma, mamma—ah, ah, *ah!*"

And Bela's face twisted into an expression of such terror and agony that Johnny was suddenly chilled—and he decided that his joke had gone far enough. In fact, all of a sudden he was pretty darned scared—he hadn't expected anything like this! Golly, if Bela really *was* sick . . .

He bent over the huddled figure on the cave floor and pointed his flashlight upward.

"Bela, look!" he said loudly. "Look up there . . . *there's* where we came in! Come on—let's go out!"

Bela didn't answer.

"Bela . . . *C'mon.*"

Bela moved, and his fingernails scratched the rock so hard it sounded like they'd tear off.

Johnny began to tremble. He looked down, the flashlight still pointing up.

Bela's eyes gleamed up at him from the floor—enormous, yellowish in the reflected light, glassy, fixed—somehow baleful.

As Johnny watched, they seemed to move closer together, and get yellower.

Johnny was so startled he dropped the flashlight. It thumped on the stone at his feet, and glass broke and the light went out.

In the blackness—the utter thick blackness—Johnny heard a scuffling sound near his feet, and a low, soft, animal snarl.

He yelled and leaped back. His foot struck the flashlight, and even as he went down he got one hand on it, and with the other hand he dragged his big hunting knife out of his belt. He hit hard on his side. He pressed the flashlight button and prayed that it would work.

It did.

Bela was gone.

Wide-eyed, Johnny rolled over. Kneeling there, he darted the light this way and that. Finally he found his voice.

"B-Bela . . ." he quavered.

Nothing happened.

He got to his feet and stood shaking. "Bela?"

There was a claws-on-stone sound from the blackness behind him.

He whirled, his neck stiff and cold, and lashed the beam of light across the shadows. He held his hunting knife hard, the point straight out, ready to stab or slice from almost any angle.

At first he saw nothing. Rocks. Curtains and pillars of colored stone. Black shadows that seemed to lean toward him.

Then a low shadow moved at the corner of his vision.

He swung the light that way.

Two yellow eyes, low against the stone floor, blazed back at him.

"B-Bela?" Johnny whispered, and lifted the light so that it shone directly on the possessor of the eyes.

The creature slitted the eyes and snarled to reveal sharp white fangs and charged.

Mr. and Mrs. Kovacs were looking both furious and terrified at the same time. They stood by the big table in the living room, where they'd been sitting playing some kind of game with big colored cards when Johnny came bursting in to tell them what had happened in the caves.

"I'm sorry," Johnny said, for the dozenth time—and wiped a hand across his tear-stained cheeks.

"I didn't mean to do it . . . it was just a joke. Please, call Sheriff Morris and ask him to get a posse out . . . they'll find Bela, honest they will!"

Mr. Kovacs' large eyes were brilliant with anger—and his deep voice was almost a snarl. "I will go look for Bela, young man—and you had better go home. I do not think we want to see you any more!"

Johnny turned miserably toward the door.

There was a growl from the darkness right outside.

Mrs. Kovacs gasped, "*Bela . . .*"

The creature came panting through the open door and made a beeline for Johnny's leg.

Johnny said, "It isn't Bela . . . it's that darned wolf cub!"

He dodged and dropped to one knee and cuffed the cub playfully on the side of the head.

It snarled like a lapdog and backed off and put its belly against the floor. Its tiny ears were flat against its head, just as old Buster's had been when he'd first seen Bela, and its yellow eyes gleamed hungrily on Johnny's throat.

It charged again, stubby legs pumping.

Johnny caught it neatly by the scruff of the neck and shook it gently. It snapped and snarled and waved its legs.

"I'll be darned," he said, forgetting for the moment that Mr. Kovacs had practically ordered him out of the house. "The little feller must've followed me here . . ."

"You saw the little wolf tonight?" Mr. Kovacs said sharply, eyes widening and glowing a little brighter.

"Sure. In the cave. Just after Bela ran off. It tried to bite me then too, and now it followed me all the way to your place." Johnny grinned feebly, looking from Mr. Kovacs' rather grim face to Mrs. Kovacs' somehow relieved one. "I guess it wants to eat me or something."

"I suppose," said Mr. Kovacs heavily, "it does."

"I'll take it outside and turn it loose again," Johnny said. "Again?"

The cub swung from Johnny's grasp, rolling its yellow eyes hungrily at the nearest finger. Johnny nodded. "I carried it up out of the caves, after I gave up hollering for Bela. Figured it wasn't right to let it die down there. Maybe when it gets older, I'll shoot it if I see it . . . but now I figured to give it a chance, it's so young."

"Oh, give him to me, young man," said Mrs. Kovacs. "He's so cute!" And she took the wolf cub from Johnny's arms before Johnny could protest it was dangerous, and cuddled it in

her own. It whined and looked up at her with its big yellow eyes, and didn't struggle at all to free itself.

Johnny was too unhappy to wonder at that, though, or even notice it.

"Now go home, young man," said Mr. Kovacs.

Johnny turned to the door again. "Will you turn it loose afterwards, Mr. Kovacs? You won't kill it, will you?"

"I will not kill it."

"And you better call the sheriff to help you look for Bela. I'll help too, if—if you want. I know the caves like—"

"Bela will be all right," Mr. Kovacs said.

"When you find him, will you please tell him I'm sorry for what I did?"

"Yes."

Johnny had reached the front door when Mrs. Kovacs said something soft in Hungarian, and Mr. Kovacs grunted and said, "Young man."

Johnny turned. "Yes, sir?"

The wolf cub was on the table, and Mr. Kovacs was thoughtfully scratching the scruff of its neck.

"Young man," Mr. Kovacs said slowly. "I do not want to be harsh. I have thought it over. What you did was not very nice—but I think it is understandable. I think it may be forgiven. And you came to us immediately and told us about it—and now you have offered to help undo what you have done."

"Yes, sir?"

"You may come here as often as you wish, and play with our Bela."

Johnny brightened. "Yes, sir! Thank you!"

"Provided you never do anything like that again."

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir!"

"Now," said Mr. Kovacs a little intently. "I would like to make absolutely certain of what happened in the cave. It happened like this, yes? Our Bela became sick; you dropped your flashlight; when you turned the light on again, Bela was gone."

"That's right, sir."

"You did *not* see where Bela went."

"No, sir."

"And then you saw the little wolf."

"Uh, huh." Johnny grinned. "It was a dope to wander in there. Lucky I came along."

"M'm," said Mr. Kovacs. "Yes." His eyes, which had become a little larger as he questioned Johnny, lost some of their wary glow; and his fingers, which had become just a tiny bit hairier, relaxed. "Now, you had better go. I will—find Bela. Good night, young man."

"Good night, Mr. Kovacs. Good night, Mrs. Kovacs."

As Johnny turned to leave again, Mr. Kovacs said, "Another thing, young man."

Johnny paused.

"I was not entirely truthful with you. Our Bela is not really sick. It is just that at certain times of the month, he is expected to be home before nightfall because . . . well, I believe you might call it a custom. A Hungarian custom. An old family custom. It must be observed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"We will not tell Bela what you did . . . if you will promise never to tell anyone what happened tonight."

"Yes, sir."

"We would not want to be thought queer by our neighbors. After all, young man, customs differ. We are all of us different."

"Yes, sir. My father taught me that."

"Did he teach you to keep promises?"

Johnny grinned. "He licks me when I don't."

"Do you promise, then?"

"Yes."

"You will make a good playmate for our Bela, as I said. Good night, young man."

Smiling, Johnny Stevens left. When he reached the edge of the cornfield, he began to whistle at the full moon overhead. He wondered if the moon always rose at seven in Hungary . . .

Naw. Maybe it was just a time set so Bela would always be home before it happened, and observe whatever the custom was. But, heck, lots of times the moon rose earlier than seven. Even the full moon, like tonight—it always rose when the sun set. Four o'clock sometimes, in winter.

Maybe—Johnny nodded, remembering something from school—maybe the Kovacs figured the time for Bela to be home by the seasons, by the months. Even by the—the—latitudes.

What a funny custom. Maybe someday Bela would tell him about it . . .

Mr. Kovacs looked thoughtfully at his son.

"We could have lost all," he told his wife, "but for a boy dropping a flashlight. Our new country is good to us. Now—the time has come when we must tell Bela what he is."

LABORATORY

GOP'S THOUGHTS HAD THE BLUISH-PURPLE TINT OF ABJECT apology: "They're landing, Master."

Pud looked up from the tiny *thig*-field he had been shaping in his tentacles. "Of course they are," he thought-snapped. "You practically invited them down, didn't you? If you'd only kept a few eyes on the Detector, instead of day-dreaming—"

"I'm sorry," Gop said unhappily. "I wasn't day-dreaming, I was observing the magnificent skill and finesse with which you shaped the *thig*. After all, this system is so isolated. No one ever came along before . . . I just supposed no one ever *would*—"

"A Scientist isn't supposed to suppose! Until he's proven wrong, he's supposed to *know*!" Thirty of Pud's eyes glowered upward at the tiny alien spaceship, only ninety or so miles above the surface of the laboratory-planet and lowering rapidly. The rest of Pud's eyes—more than a hundred of them, set haphazardously in his various-sized heads like *gurf*-seeds on rolls—scoured every inch of the planet's visible surface, to make certain that no sign of the Vegans' presence on the planet, from the tiniest experiment to the gigantic servo-mechanical eating pits, was left operating or visible.

Irritatedly he squelched out of existence a *yim*-field that had taken three weeks of laborious psycho-induction to develop. His psychokineticut stripped it of cohesion, and its faint whine-and-crackle vanished.

"I told you to deactivate *all* our experiments," he snapped at Gop. "Don't you understand Vegan?"

Abashed, the Junior Scientist lowered his many eyes.

"I—I'm sorry," Gop said humbly. "I thought the *yim* might wait until the creatures landed, Master . . . perhaps their auditory apparatus would not have been sufficient to reveal its presence to them, in which case the field would not have had to be—"

"All right, all right," Pud grunted. "I appreciate your point . . . but, dripping mouthfuls, you know that *any* risk of detection is too great. You know the regulations on Contact!"

"Yes, Master."

"Speaking of which, part of your seventh head is showing."

The Junior Scientist included the head in the personal invisibility field which he himself was broadcasting.

"Of all the suns in this sector," Pud thought, eyeing the little spaceship, "and of all the planets around this particular sun, they have to choose this one to land on. *Chew!*"

Gop flushed. A member of the Transverse Colon Revivalists, he found Pud's constant swearing very disturbing. He sighed inwardly. Usually at least one of Pud's heads could manage to keep its sense of humor, but right now all of them were like proton-storms. The Senior Scientist was on the verge of one of his totalitantrums.

"They must have sighted flashes from our experiments," Pud went on, "before you decided you could spare just *one* set of eyes for the Detector!"

Though both Vegans were invisible to other eyes, they remained visible to each other because their eyes were adjusted to the wave-length of their invisibility fields. By the same token, they could see all their invisible experiments—a vast litter of gadgets, gismos, gargantuan gimmicks, shining tools, huge and infinitesimal instruments, stacks of supplies, and various types of energy fields, the latter all frozen in mid-activity like smudges on a pane of glass. The sandy ground was the floor of the Vegans' laboratory; small hills and outcroppings of rock were their chairs and work-benches. Like a spaceship junkyard, or an enormous open-air machinery warehouse, the laboratory stretched away from the two Scientists in every direction to the planetoid's near horizon.

Pud intensified the general invisibility field to the last notch, and the invisible experiments became even more invisible.

The *thig*-field was a nameless-colored whorl of energy in the Senior Scientist's tentacles. In his concern for the other experiments, he had forgotten to deactivate it. It grew eagerly to the size of a back yard, then of a baseball diamond, then of a traffic oval, and one shimmering edge of it touched his body, which he had not insulated. Energy crackled. Pud jumped forty feet into the air, swearing, and slapped the field into non-existence between two tentacles.

His body, big as an apartment house, floated slowly downward in the laboratory-planet's light gravity.

The tiny alien spaceship touched the ground just as he did. The rocket flare flickered and died.

The ship sat on its fins, about thirty feet—Vegan feet—away. In its shining side, a few Vegan inches above the still smoking rocket tubes, was a small black hole.

"Master, look!" Gop thought. "Their ship is damaged . . .

perhaps that's why they landed!" And he started to extend a tentative extra-sensory probe through the hole.

Pud lashed out with a probe of his own, knocking Gop's aside before it could enter the hole. "Nincompoop! . . . don't go esprobing until we know if they're sensitive to it or not! Can't you remember the regulations on Contact for just one *minute*?"

The tiny spaceship sat silently, while its occupants evidently studied the lay of the land. Small turrets halfway up its sides twitched this way and that, pointing popgun armament.

Pud inspected the weapons extrasensorily, and thought an amused snort: the things tossed a simple hydrogen-helium pellet for a short distance.

Gop, nursing a walloping headache as a result of Pud's rough counterprobe, thought sourly to himself: "I try to save the *yim* . . . that's wrong. He forgets to deactivate the *thig* . . . that's all right. I esprobe . . . that's wrong. He esprobes . . . that's all right."

At last: "They're getting out," Gop observed.

A tiny airlock had opened in the side of the ship. A metal ladder poked out, swung down, settled against the ground.

The aliens—two of them—appeared; looked down, looked up, looked to the right and to the left. Then they came warily down the ladder.

For a few minutes the giant Vegans watched the creatures wander about. One of them approached one of Pud's tails. Irritatedly Pud lifted it out of the way. The little creature snooped on, unaware that twenty tons of invisible silicoid flesh hung over its head. Pud curled the tail close to him, and did likewise with all his other tails.

"You'd better do the same," he advised Gop, his thought-tone peevish.

Silently Gop drew in his tails. One unwise move, he knew, and the Senior Scientist would start thinking in roars.

One of Gop's tails scraped slightly against a huge boulder. The scales made a tractor-on-gravel sound.

Pud thought in roars.

The tiny creature had stopped and was turning its helmeted head this way and that, as if trying to see where the sound had come from. It had drawn a weapon of some sort from a holster at its belt—another thermonuclear popgun.

The creature turned and came back toward the Vegans, heading for its ship. Pud lifted his tail again. The creature passed under it, reached the ship, joined its partner.

"I heard it too, Johnny," Helen Gorman said nervously. "A loud scraping noise—"

"It seemed to come from right behind me," Johnny Gorman said. "Damn near scared me off the planet . . . I thought it was a rockslide. Or the biggest critter in creation, sneaking up on me. I couldn't see anything, though . . . could you?"

"No."

Johnny stood there, blaster in hand, looking around, eyes sharp behind his faceplate. He saw nothing but flat, grayish-red ground, a scattering of stone outcroppings large and small; nothing but the star-clouded black of space above the near horizon, and the small sun of the system, riding a low hillock like a beacon.

"Blue light," he said thoughtfully. "Green light. Red and purple lights. And a mess of crazy colors we never saw before. Whatever those flashes were, honey, they looked artificial to me . . ."

Helen frowned. "We were pretty far off-world when we saw them, Johnny. Maybe they were aurorae—or reflections from mineral pockets. Or magnetic phenomena of some kind . . . that could be why the ship didn't handle right during landing—"

Johnny studied the upside-down dials on the protruding chest-board of his spacesuit.

"No neon in the atmosphere," he said. "Darned little argon, or any other inert gas. The only large mineral deposits within fifty miles are straight down. And this clod's about as magnetic as an onion." He gave the surrounding bleak terrain another narrow-eyed scrutiny. "I suppose it *could* have been some kind of aurora, though . . . it's gone now, and there isn't a sign of anything that could have produced such a rumpus." He looked around again, then sighed and finally holstered his blaster. "Guess I'm the worrying type, hon. Nothing alive around here."

"I wonder what that sound was."

"Probably a rock falling. This area's been undisturbed for God knows how many million years . . . the jolt of our landing just shook things up a little." He grinned, a little sheepishly. "As for the landing . . . I was so scared after that meteor hit us, it's a wonder I didn't nail the ship halfway into the planet, instead of just jolting us up."

Helen looked up at the three-foot hole in the side of the ship.

Johnny followed her gaze, and grunted. "We'd better get to work." He turned to the ladder that led up to the airlock. "I'll rig the compressor to charge the spare oxytanks . . . we'll have to delouse this air of ammonia, but otherwise it's fine. Look, honey, I won't need any help; why don't you get busy on a PC?"

Helen nodded, still staring up at the meteor-hole. "You know," she said slowly, "it wouldn't happen again this way in a million years, Johnny. Thank God, this clod was here . . . we ought to name it Lifesaver."

"Yeah, sure," Johnny said ironically. "It'll save our lives. Only thing is, it got us into this mess in the first place!"

He started up the ladder, using only his arms, legs trailing.

Helen got down on hands and knees and began poking around for the two dozen or so samples needed for Standard Planetary Classification. Bits of rock, air, vegetable growth, dust—the dust was very important. All went into vac-containers at her belt.

Then suddenly she said, "O-o-o-oo!" and reared back on her knees and clapped both hands to her helmet. Her eyes squeezed shut behind her faceplate, then opened wide and frightened.

By the time her hands reached her helmet, Johnny had his blaster out and was floating toward the ground, looking around for something to shoot at. His boots touched, and two long light-gravity steps brought him to her side.

Pud had been leaning over the tiny spaceship, one of his faces only feet above the little creatures.

Gop's thought came: "What are they?"

"Fanged if I know. Bipedes . . . never saw such little ones." Pud adjusted several eyes to a certain wavelength and studied the creatures through their spacesuits. He gave Gop a thought-nod: "Mammals. Bi-sexual. They're probably mates."

"It's a miracle they didn't land right in the middle of one of our experiments."

That brought back Pud's ill-temper. "Miracle! Didn't you see me give this cosmic kiddycar of theirs a couple of psychokineticclouts so they'd land where they did?" The Senior Scientist glared around at their thousand-and-one experiments, and then down at the little spaceship, smaller than the smallest experiment, squatting on toy fins. He curled a tentacle, as if wishing he could swat it.

Gop knew, however, that despite Pud's irritation at having his work interrupted, the Senior Scientist was just a little intrigued by the aliens. No matter how insignificant they were they were animate life of some intelligence, and Pud must be wondering about them.

Gop thought it might be a good idea to dwell on that, in order to keep Pud from getting his heads in an uproar again.

"Can you get into their thoughts?" he inquired.

"I haven't tried. I don't think I could keep my potential down to their level."

"Wonder where they're from."

"Who cares?" Pud snorted. "I just wish they'd go away."

Gop noted, though, that Pud's heads were lowering closer over the creatures.

"They're nowhere near acceptable Contact level, are they?" Gop said, after a moment.

"From their appearance, I'd say they're even beneath classification. Reaction motor in their ship. Primitive weapons. Protective garments . . . they can't even adjust physically to hostile environments!"

A minute passed.

Pud said, "Mm. Well. I think I *will* see what I can read . . . just to have something to talk about at the Scientists' Club."

He sent out a tentative probe . . . a little one . . . just enough to register in one of his brains the total conscious content of one of the little creature's minds. He was afraid to go deeper, after the subconscious, though actually that was far more important. But deep probing would probably be felt for what it was, while conscious probing was just a little painful.

The creature popped erect in its squatting position, and clapped its upper extremities to its head.

The other one, which had been scrambling up the ladder to the ship's airlock, drew its popgun and joined the first.

"They're from someplace called Earth," Pud said. "In the V-LM-12Xva Sector of this Galaxy, as nearly as I can make out. They're an Exploration Team, sent out by their planet to gather data on the nature of the physical universe." He paused to consult the third memory bank of his fifth brain, where he had impressed the content of the creature's mind. "They've had space travel for about two hundred of their years. I translate that as about eleven of ours." He consulted again. "Highly materialistic. Externally focused. Very limited sensorium. An infant race, chasing everything that moves, round and round through their little three-dimensional universe. They've a long way to go."

"What are they doing here?"

"Hm." Pud consulted again. "A routine exploration flight brought them to this system . . . and an almost unbelievable coincidence has served to delay them here. They dropped their meteor-screens for just a moment—at just the wrong moment. A large meteor came along, entered the ship, and destroyed both their atmosphere-manufacturing equipment and the large pressure tank of atmosphere which they kept as reserve in case the equipment should fail." He paused. "Mixture of hydrogen and oxygen . . . they can't live without it. At any rate, the ship was evacuated, and they barely had time to get into the . . . mm, spacesuits, they call them . . . which they

now wear. The accident left them with no atmosphere whatever, except the small amount in the tanks of those suits. That will be exhausted in a short time . . . I gather that if this planet hadn't been here, they'd have been goners. As it stands, they plan to charge their spare suit-tanks, which weren't harmed, with the air of this planet, and then return to their Earth, subsisting on the tanked air, by hyperspatial drive. . . ." Again Pud paused. "Hm. *Well*, now! I'd overlooked that. So they have hyperspatial drive, at least . . . and after only two hundred years of space travel! Hm. Perhaps they *are* worth a closer look . . ."

Pud lowered his heads over the two little aliens, who were moving warily, popguns drawn, away from the ship.

"Pud," Gop said nervously.

"What?"

"One of them is crawling toward the time-warp."

"Well, don't tell *me* about it . . . lift the warp out of the way!"

Gop extended a tentacle, first reconstituting it on the seventh atomic sublevel so he wouldn't get it blown off, and gently picked up the time-warp. It looked like a blue-violet frozen haze in his grasp. He set it down on the other side of the spaceship, anchoring it again to *now* so it wouldn't go flapping off along the time-continuum.

"So they *didn't* land because they saw flashes from our experiments," he said a little triumphantly.

One of Pud's heads turned and gave the Junior Scientist an acid look, while the others continued to observe the aliens.

"They lowered their meteor-screens," he said nastily, "thus bringing about this entire bother, because they wanted to get a better look at the flashes."

Johnny Gorman had just said to Helen, "I want to chip a few samples off that outcropping over there . . . come on, hon."

He started toward the ridge of gray-black rock. Helen followed on his heels.

"As-pir-in," she said, deliberately falsetto, and her helmet-valve fed her another pill with a sip of water.

"Then we'll go back and stick inside the ship until the tanks are charged," Johnny went on, a little grimly. "I think we're just edgy. Planets don't give people headaches . . . and there's nothing alive within a million miles of this dustball." He hefted his blaster, which he had adjusted to Wide-Field. "But just in case . . ."

"Pud," Gop said, still more nervously.

"Yes, I see, you idiot! Lift the *tharn*-field out of their way . . . I'll take care of the space-warp generator!"

The giant Vegans, for all their bulk, moved soundlessly and at great speed until they were between the aliens and the stone outcropping toward which they appeared to be heading. Gop extended a tentacle, curled it at an odd angle, and picked up the shimmering *tharn*-field, which was the Vegans' reservoir of Basic Universal Energy. Set in any energy matrix, *tharn* became that energy; added to any existing energy, *tharn* augmented it to any desired potential. Thus it was extremely valuable to their experiments . . . and very risky stuff to handle, as well.

Gingerly, Gop set the *tharn* down beyond the outcropping. At the same time he picked up several instruments that lay nearby—an electron-wrench, a *snurling*-iron, a *plotz*-meter, several pencil-rays. He placed them on the ground beside the *tharn*.

Pud had curled twelve tentacles around the space-warp generator—it was as big as a city block, and heavy, even in light gravity. He puffed a thought at Gop: "Give me a tentacle."

Gop helped his Master place the generator safely on the other side of the ridge.

Johnny Gorman chipped off a handful of rock, and shoved it into the vac-container at his belt.

"Okay, hon," he said. "Let's go."

They stood one more moment atop the ridge, looking out over the barren, rusty-gray plain that the ridge had until now concealed from their gaze.

"Looks just as dead as the rest," Johnny observed. "I guess we were just jumpy over nothing." He turned to start down the slope. "Come on."

In three long light-gravity steps he had reached the bottom, and turned to steady Helen.

She wasn't there. . . .

She had tripped and tumbled off the other side of the ridge. He could hear her screaming.

"*Putrefied proteins!*" Pud roared. "Help me get it out of the *tharn!*"

The two Vegans leaned over the ridge. While Gop forced the writhing folds of the *tharn*-field apart with two reconstituted tentacles, Pud reached in, plucked the little alien out and set it upright.

It immediately scabbled up the side of the ridge as fast as it could and joined its mate, which had bounded up the other side.

"Now look at what you've done!" Pud raged. "What about the rules on Contact! The Examiners will get this out of us

when we report on our Projects . . . mountains of bites, we've revealed ourselves!"

"Not really, Master," Gop said, rushing his thoughts. "All the creature will know is that it tumbled into the field, and then was somehow ejected by it . . . a trick of gravity, perhaps . . . a magnetic vortex . . . it won't know what really happened—"

"That—field—was—supposed—to—be—turned—off," Pud said, every one of his faces green with rage.

"I—"

"You are a stupid, clumsy, few-headed piece of *provender!*"

Gop flushed clear down to his tails. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't think of everything at once! I must have accidentally activated the *tharn* when I moved it. I'm sorry!"

Pud clapped a tentacle to his prime forehead. "What next!" he moaned.

"Oh, Johnny, Johnny," Helen sobbed. "I tripped when I started to turn around, and fell down the other side, and all of a sudden . . . it was horrible . . . I thought I was going *crazy*—"

Johnny Gorman had his arms tight around her. Behind her back, his blaster was pointed straight down the far slope of the ridge, ready to atomize anything that moved.

"What, honey?" he said. "What happened? I didn't see anything near you . . . what happened?"

"It was like I was in a hurricane . . . I couldn't see anything, but something seemed to be whirling around me, something as big as the universe . . . and it seemed to be whirling *inside* me too! I felt—it felt like . . . Johnny, I was *crossed!*"

"Crossed?" He shook her gently. "What do you mean, you were crossed?"

"It felt like my right side was my left side, and my heart was beating backwards, and my eyes were looking at each other, and I was just twisted all downside up outside and inside out upside, and . . . Johnny," she wailed, "I *am* going *crazy!*"

"Oh, no, you're not," he said grimly. "You're going back to the ship! I don't know what gives with this creepy clod, but I know we're not moving an inch outside the ship until we blast off! *Come on!*"

"They're crawling back toward their ship, Pud . . . *look out*, they're heading for the dimensional-warp!"

Pud extended a tentacle ninety feet and slapped the dimensional-warp out of the path of the scurrying creatures.

The warp bounced silently on the rocky ground, caromed

like a fireball from boulder to boulder, encountered stray radiation from the *tharn*-field which still glowed invisibly on the other side of the ridge, and became activated; it emitted concentric spheres of nameless-colored energy, and a vast snapping and crackling.

"*There*," Gop thought triumphantly at Pud. "That's just what I did with the *tharn*-field . . . I guess nobody is above accidents, eh?"

Pud thought pure vitamins at his Junior Scientist. "You idiot, I didn't accidentally turn on the warp! You left the *tharn* on, and it triggered the warp! *Why didn't you deactivate the tharn?*"

"Why didn't you?" Gop shot back.

Pud lashed a tentacle over the outcropping, and the *tharn*-field became inactive. Then he looked around, and every eye in his prime head popped. "Look out, the dimensional-warp is spreading . . . it's lost its cohesion . . . oh, digestion, they're in *that* now!"

Johnny and Helen Gorman were in a universe of blazing stars and nebulae that whirled like cosmic carousels; of gas clouds that seethed in giant turbulence . . . it was the universe in its death-throes . . .

"Johnny . . ."

"Helen . . ."

The boiling universe exploded away from them in soundless radiation, in all directions . . . in *five* directions, their subconscious minds told them . . . it vanished into nothingness, a nothingness that surrounded them like white blindness, and then suddenly it was restored again, roiling, churning, flashing with the bright eyes of novae, shot with the sinuous streamers of rushing gas clouds, pulsing with the heartbeats of winking variables . . .

And suddenly they were tumbling head over heels along the rocky ground of the little planetoid again.

"Johnny . . ."

"Helen . . ."

"At least we got them out of *that*," Pud puffed. "The sub-temporal field, Gop . . . help me lift it . . . hurry!"

"Master, *all* our experiments are activated! The *tharn* radiated enough to activate *everything*!"

"*Help me lift the sub-temporal field!*"

"Master, it's too late . . . they're *in* it!"

A million miles above their heads was the vast sweep of All Time, like a rushing, glassy, upside-down river . . . they tumbled through a chaos where Time, twice in each beat of their hearts, bounced back and forth between creation and entropy, and took them with it . . . Time was a torrent be-

neath whose surface they were yanked back and forth from Beyond the End to Before the Beginning like guppies on a deepsea line; a torrent whose banks were dark eternity, and whose waters were the slippery substance of years. . . .

"Johnny . . ."

"Helen . . ."

Pud deactivated the sub-temporal field with a lash of a tentacle, and the two little aliens rolled from it like dice from a cup, gasping and wailing. Immediately they started running again toward their ship, dodging between the faint flickers of red, blue, green, scarlet and nameless-colored light that marked the location of those experiments which, now activated and releasing their fantastic energies, defied even the invisibility fields that still surrounded them.

The aliens brushed against another experimental field, and it twisted itself in one millionth of a second into a fifth-dimensional topological monstrosity that would take weeks to untangle—if it didn't explode first, for it bulged dangerously at the seams.

Pud hastily back-tentacled the field into an interdimensional-vortex, where, if it did explode, it would disrupt an uninhabited universe so far down on the scale of subspaces that nobody would get hurt.

Then the Senior Scientist gathered ten tons of machinery in a tentacle and hoisted it while the creatures ran beneath. Gop was psychokineticarrying five energy-fields toward the sidelines, with another dozen or so wrapped in his tentacles. Pud silently dumped his load of machinery and reached for something else in the creatures' path.

But the creatures scurried erratically, stopping, dashing off in this direction, skidding to a halt as they saw something else to terrify them, and then dashing off in *that* direction just as the Vegans had dealt with an obstacle to their progress in *this* direction.

"Pud! . . . one of them fell through the intraspatial-doorway to the other side of the planet!"

"Well, for the love of swallowing, reach through and get it! If those beasts see it, they'll tear it to pieces!"

Helen Gorman faced something that was a cross between a tomcat and an eggplant on stilts. It looked hungry. It bounded toward her in forty foot lopes.

"Johnny . . . Johnny, where are you . . ."

She fainted.

Several other garage-sized beasts converged on her, all looking as hungry as the first. In reality, they weren't hungry—their food consisted of stone, primarily, while they also drew sustenance from cosmic radiation. But they just

liked to tear things to pieces. They were native to the planetoid; the Vegan Scientists had gathered them up and shoved them through the intraspatial-doorway to this side of the planet, where they wouldn't be underfoot all the time. It was a one-way doorway, through which Pud or Gop would occasionally reach to pluck one of the beasts back for use in experimentation.

Now, just as the beasts reached Helen Gorman, one of Gop's tentacles came through the doorway, followed by one of his smaller heads. The Junior Scientist picked up Helen, and hastily extruded another tentacle from the first to bat aside one of the beasts that leaped after her.

The part of the tentacle bearing Helen Gorman swished back through the doorway. The head and the rest of the tentacle followed.

The beasts commenced fighting among themselves, which was what they did most of the time anyway.

Gop, however, in his haste, had forgotten to repolarize the molecules of his body while retreating through the doorway . . . and the moment he cleared the doorway on the other side of the planet, the doorway reversed—still one-way, but now the *other* way.

And eventually one of the beasts, attracted by all the flickering and flashing and frantic scrabbling visible through the doorway, abandoned the fun of the fight and leaped, like a ten-ton gopher, through the opening.

The others followed, naturally. They always chased and tore apart the first one to cut and run.

Gop had just set Helen Gorman on the ground, and Johnny Gorman, seeing her apparently materialize from thin air and float downward, had just started to stagger toward her, when the ten-ton gopher began to vivisect one of Pud's tails. The animal hadn't seen the tail, of course—it was invisible. But it had stumbled over it, and been intrigued.

Pud leaped ninety feet into the air, roaring. Roaring out loud, not thought-roaring. Roaring with a dozen gigantic throats. The sound thundered and rolled and crashed and echoed from the low hills around.

The beast fell off Pud's tail, bounced, looked around, and made for Johnny Gorman as the only visible moving object.

Johnny's eyes were still bugging from the gargantuan roar he had just heard. He saw the beast and dodged frantically, just as Gop's invisible tentacle shot out to bowl the beast over.

In dodging, Johnny tumbled into another energy-field.

. . . He stood on his own face, saw before his eyes the hairy mole on the back of his neck, and threw a gray-and-red insideout hand before his eyes in complete terror. Then Pud

nudged him gently out of the field, and before Johnny's eyes, in an instantaneous and unfathomable convolution, the hand became normal again.

About that time the rest of the beasts emerged from the intra-spatial-doorway. While some of them continued the fight that had begun on the other side of the planet, others started for Johnny Gorman and for Helen, who was now sitting up weakly and shaking her head.

A beast resembling a steam-shovel on spider's legs rammed full-tilt into a force-field. The field bounced fifty feet and merged with another field in silent but cataclysmic embrace, producing a sub-field which converted one tenth of one percent of all water within a hundred foot radius to alcohol.

The effect on Johnny and Helen was instantaneous . . . they became drunk as hoot-owls. Their eyes bleared and refused to focus. Their jaws sagged. Johnny stumbled, and sat down hard. He and Helen stared dolefully at each other through their faceplates.

Pud gave up every last hope of avoiding Contact.

He picked up Johnny with one tentacle and Helen with another and set them down on top of their spaceship, where there was just enough reasonably flat surface on the ship's snub nose to hold them.

The beasts were chasing one another around and around through the wreckage of the laboratory. They romped and trampled over delicate machines, sent heavier equipment spinning to smash against boulders; they ran head-on into sizzling energy-fields and, head-off, kept running.

Pud grabbed up an armful of beasts, raced to the doorway, reversed it and poured them through. He grabbed up more beasts, threw them after. Gop was busily engaged in the same task. Some of the beasts began fighting among themselves even as the Vegans held them—Gop jumped as one tore six cubic yards of flesh from a tentacle. He healed the tentacle immediately, then hardened it and all his other tentacles to the consistency of pig iron. He held back that particular beast from the lot. When the others had been tossed through, he hauled back his tentacle, wound up, and pegged the offending beast with all his might. It streaked through the doorway like a projectile, legs and eyestalks rigid.

Pud plucked a machine from the two-foot claws of the very last beast, and tossed the beast through. Then he examined the machine—it was beyond repair. He angrily slammed that through the doorway too.

In ten seconds, the two Vegan Scientists had slapped and mauled all their rioting experiments into inaction.

Silence descended over the battleground. Silence, more nerve-shattering than the noise had been.

Pud looked around at the remains of the laboratory, every face forest-green with rage.

Machines lay broken, tilted, flickering, whining, wheezing, like bodies of the wounded. Delicate instruments were smashed to bits. The involuted field that Pud had flung through the vortex had evidently burst, as he had feared—for the vortex had vanished. So, probably, had the universe the field had burst in. The two fields that had interlocked were ruined, each having contaminated the other beyond use. Other energy-fields, having absorbed an excess of energy from the *tharn*, were bloated monstrosities or burned-out husks.

It would take weeks to get the place straightened up . . . even longer to replace the smashed equipment and restore the ruined fields.

Many experiments in which time had been a factor would take months—and in some cases years—to duplicate.

All that was bad enough.

But worst of all . . . the little aliens had been *Contacted*. Like it or not, the aliens knew that something was very much up on this planetoid.

Like it or not, they'd report that—and more of their kind would come scurrying back to investigate.

Pud groaned, and studied the little creatures, who sat huddled together on the nose of the ship.

"Well," he thought sourly to Gop, "here we are."

"I—yes, Master."

"Do you think that from now on you'll watch the Detector?"

"Oh, yes, Master—I will!"

"And do you think it matters a Chew now if you do or not? Now that we've revealed ourselves?"

"I—I—"

"We have a choice," Pud said acidly. "We can destroy these little aliens, so they can't report what they've seen. That's out, of course. Or we can move our laboratory to another system . . . a formidable job, and Food knows whether we'd ever find another planet so suited to our needs. And even if we *did* do that, and they found nothing when they returned here, they'd still know we were around somewhere. You know that they've seen enough to draw the very conclusions we don't want them to draw! You know how vital it is that no race under Contact-level status know of the existence of other intelligent races . . . particularly races far in advance of it. Such knowledge can alter the entire course of their development."

"Yes, Master."

"So what are we to do, eh? Here we are. And there—" Pud motioned with a tentacle at the little aliens—"they are. As you can see, we must reveal ourselves to still a greater extent . . . they can't even get into their ship to leave the planet without our help!"

Gop was silent.

"Also—" Pud sent a brief extrasensory probe at the aliens, and both of them clutched at their helmeted heads—"their problem of air supply is critical. There is very little left in their suit-tanks, and the time required for their machines to refine air from this planet's atmosphere has been wasted in—in—the *entertainment* so recently concluded. At this moment they are resigned to death. Naturally, we must help them." He paused. "Well, my brilliant, capable, young Junior Nincompoop? Any ideas on how we can help them, and still keep our Scientists' status when the Examiners get the story of this mess out of us?"

"Yes, Master."

"I thought not." Pud continued his frowning scrutiny of the aliens for a moment. Then he looked up, his faces blank. "Eh? you *do*?"

"Yes, Master."

"Well, great gobs of gulosity, *what*?"

"Master, do you recall the time experiment that you wanted to try a few years ago? Do you recall that the idea appealed to you very much, but that you wanted an intelligent subject for it, so we could determine results by observing rational reactions?"

"I recall it, all right. My brave young Junior Scientist declined to be the subject . . . though Food knows you're hardly intelligent enough to qualify anyway! Yes, I remember . . . but what's that got to do with—"

Pud paused. The jaws of his secondary heads, which were more given to emotion, dropped. Then slowly his faces brightened, and his many eyes began to glow.

"Ah," he thought softly.

"You see, Master?"

"I do indeed."

"If it works, we'll have no more problem. The Examiners will be pleased at our ingenuity. The aliens will no longer—"

"I see, I *see* . . . all right, let's try it!"

Pud reached down and picked one of the aliens off the nose of the ship. It slumped in his grasp immediately. The other alien began firing its popgun frantically at the seemingly empty air through which its mate mysteriously rose.

The thermonuclear bolts tickled Pud's hide. He sighed and

relaxed his personal invisibility field and became visible. That didn't matter now.

The alien stared upward. Its face whitened. It dropped its popgun and fell over backward, slid gently off the ship's nose and started a slow light-gravity fall toward the ground.

Pud caught it, and said, "I thought that might happen. Evidently they lose consciousness rather easily at unaccustomed sights. A provincial trait."

He slid the aliens gently into the airlock of their ship.

The Vegans waited for the aliens to regain consciousness.

Eventually one did. Immediately, it dragged the other back from the lock, into the body of the ship. A moment later the lock closed.

"Now hold the ship," Pud told Gop, "while I form the field."

Flame flickered from the ship's lower end. It rose a few inches off the ground. Gop placed a tentacle on its nose and forced it down again. He waited, while the ship throbbed and wobbled beneath the tentacle.

Now, for the first time, Gop himself esprobed the aliens. He sent a gentle probe into one of their minds—and blinked at the turmoil of terror and helplessness he found there.

Faced with death at the hands of "giant monsters," the aliens preferred to take off and "die cleanly" in space from asphyxiation, or even by a mutual self-destruction pact that would provide less discomfort.

Gop withdrew his probe, wondering that any intelligent creature could become sufficiently panicky to overlook the fact that if the "monsters" had wanted to kill them, they would be a dozen times dead already.

Pud had shaped a time-field of the type necessary to do the job. It was a pale-green haze in his tentacles.

He released the field and, under his direction, it leaped to surround the spaceship, clinging to it like a soft cloak. As the Vegans watched, it seemed to melt into the metal and become a part of it—the whole ship glowed a soft, luminescent green.

"Let it go," Pud said.

Gop removed his tentacle.

The ship rose on its flicker of flame—rose past the Vegans' enormous legs and tails, past their gigantic tentacled bodies, past their many necks and faces, rose over their heads.

Gop sneezed as the flame brushed a face.

And Pud began shaping a psychokinetic bolt in his prime brain. For this purpose he marshaled the resources of all his other brains as well, and every head except his prime one assumed an idiot stare.

He said, "Now!" and loosed the bolt as a tight-beam, aimed at the ship and invested with ninety-two separate and carefully calculated phase-motions.

The ship froze, fifty miles over their heads. The flicker from its rocket tubes became a steady, motionless glow.

Pud said, "Now," again, and altered a number of the phase-motions once, twice, three times, in an intricate pattern.

The ship vanished.

As one, the many heads of the Vegan Scientists turned to stare at the point in the sky where they had first sighted the ship.

There it was, coasting past the laboratory-planet, tubes lifeless; coasting on the velocity that had brought it from the last star it had visited.

There it was, just as it had been before the tiny aliens had sighted the flickerings that had caused them to relax their meteor-screens.

There it was, sent back in time to before all the day's frantic happenings had happened. . . .

Pud and Gop esprobed the distant aliens . . . and then looked at each other in complete satisfaction.

"Fine!" Pud said. "They don't remember a thing . . . not a single alimentary thing!" He looked around them, at the shambles of the laboratory. "It's a pity the experiment couldn't repair all this as well . . . is everything turned off?"

"Everything, Master."

"No experiments operating, you nincompoop? No flashes?"

"None, Master."

"Then they should have no reason to land, you idiot."

"You know," Pud said, "in a way it was rather a fortunate thing that they landed. It enabled me to perform a very interesting experiment. We have demonstrated that a creature returned through time along the third *flud*-subcontinuum will not retain memory of the process, or of what transpired between a particular point in time and one's circular return to it. I'm glad you stimulated me to think of it. Best idea I ever had."

Pud turned his attention to the ruins of the laboratory. He moved off, half his heads agonizing over the destruction caused by today's encounter, the other half glowing at its satisfactory conclusion.

Gop sighed, and esprobed the little aliens for the last time . . . a final check, to make certain that they remembered nothing.

"Johnny, how about that little planet down there . . . to the left?"

"Let's drop the meteor-screens for a better look."

Hastily, Gop reached out and tapped an advancing meteor aside.

"Heck, that planet looks like a dud, all right . . . but it's two days to the next one . . . and I've got a terrific headache!"

"Funny . . . I've got one too."

"Well, what say we land and stretch our—"

By that time Gop had hastily withdrawn his headache-causing probe. He stared anxiously upward.

After a moment, he said, "They're landing, Master."

THE GOOD DOG

ONCE, LONG AGO, THE DEVIL BUILT A BRIDGE. IN THE TWINKLING of an eye, a bridge of seasoned wood and greystone appeared over a stream in the center of a small village which shall here be nameless, for both village and bridge are gone, and what's past is past.

The Devil built the bridge with the proviso that the soul of the first being to pass over it should belong to him. To this the townspeople agreed—for they had a plan.

The poet Longfellow has recorded what followed:

"At length the bridge being all completed,
The Abbot, standing at its head,
Threw across it a loaf of bread,
Which a hungry dog sprang after,
And the rocks reechoed with the
 peals of laughter
To see the Devil thus defeated."

Longfellow does not go on to describe with what earth-shaking snarls the Devil greeted this stratagem. Nor does he record the wails of the unoffending dog as the Devil pounced upon it ere it had even sniffed the bread which had lured it to its doom, and wrested its soul brutally from its galvanized body, and disappeared Hellwards in a puff of rotten smoke. The bridge had been gotten, the Devil had been done, and that was enough for the townspeople; and evidently, for Longfellow as well.

But this seems rather an anthropocentric view to take of the matter. What of the *dog*?

Some of you will object that animals have no souls. Let me assure you that they do. Regard if you will the faithful watchdog, the mother tiger defending her young, monkeys at their clever play, swallows in migration slowing for a cripple, the limpid eye of the fawn, the dog mourning at his master's grave or, *probatum est*, finding his way with mystic determination to his master's side across miles upon miles of unknown terrain; regard the mother bird feeding her young, the mating minuet of the peacock who in the East symbolizes immortality, the community spirit of an ant-city—regard all these, and tell me animals have no souls; and I will tell you that we had better define our terms.

But let's have no debate—the dog had a soul, and the Devil made off with it, albeit with utter absence of enthusiasm.

The dog's lineage is as uncertain as is certain the fact that it was a very good dog. It was frankly a mutt. At the time of its demise it was six years and odd months old; and never in its life had it bitten anyone, or bayed with sleep-destroying vigor in the early morning hours, or chewed or torn up any possession of the villagers', or stolen one particle of food. It was known as a friendly dog: mothers had trusted it to romp with their children. Assuredly it had chased cats; but this scarcely figures as a canine sin, and besides it had killed none of them. Far from blood-lust, its sole emotion at such times was regret that it could not climb trees and continue the sport.

Children wept at the scene of its sacrifice, while adults admired the bridge, and the episode proved to be one of the basics of many later and interesting neuroses.

A brief description will suffice: medium size, white with brown spots, one floppy ear and a tail that had been broken by the wheel of a farmer's cart as the dog had slept by the roadside. Of these characteristics the dog in dying suffered the loss only of its coloration: its soul was uniformly grey.

Upon reaching Hell with the struggling, howling, thoroughly outraged dog-soul under his arm, the Devil paused at the great bronze doors of his Castle, faced in the general direction of midwestern Gehenna, released the soul, and, before it could fall to the smoking flagstones, swung one cloven foot and punted it away with every ounce of his fury and indignation.

Yowling, legs and tail rigid, the soul rose up, up, up, to disappear into the red-flickering haze that surrounded the Castle. The superhuman impetus of the kick traveled it in fantastic flight like some Spartan dog of Diana, high above the landscapes of Hell. Gradually the flight leveled, rounded downward, faster and faster, thick stinking air whistling

louder and louder past the dog-soul's flapping ears, ruffling its grey soul-fur, bringing tears to its horrified eyes; faster and faster descending toward the ugly terrain that waited below. Its soul-hackles rose at the sight of coiling, unquenchable flames, of vast red-shot towers of smoke like dragons' breath; it curled its lips at the sight of spraying torrents of lava and blinding lakes of molten brass and iron; it gritted its teeth at the sight of jagged cliffs and dizzy black mountains and abysmal valleys from which rose the crack of whips, the clatter of demoniacal hoofs, the cacophonous screeching of the damned.

It began to howl.

Far below, a demon looked up, pricking his ears. "What in Hell was *that*?"

Another demon wrenched his pitchfork from the buttocks of a prostrate soul. He squinted upwards. "Don't know . . . it's the Damnedest sound I ever heard. Maybe the Chief is trying out some new method of tormen—"

"Look out," said the first demon. "Something's falling toward us . . . *duck!*"

The dog-soul came turning and twisting down to splash deep into a pool of lava. Droplets like liquid rubies flew in every direction, some of them lighting on the soul-skin of the prostrate human soul, who whined shrilly; and others on the skins of the demons, which twitched in pleasure.

The dog-soul surfaced and swam about in the pool, lips drawn back, ears flattened, nose pointing upward, head straining forward, eyes wide. He dog-paddled. He barked his many misgivings.

The demons approached the pool cautiously. One, whose name was Zut, poked his pitchfork at the swimming soul. What is it?"

The other demon, whose name was Pud, dropped to his knees, thrust his arm into the pool, fished around, got a good grip on the dog-soul, and yanked it out. The dog-soul snarled and shook itself, eying the demons with utter distrust.

"I think it's a dog," said Pud, rubbing the lava into his arm.

"A dog?" said Zut doubtfully. "In *Hell*?"

"That's what it looks like. I wonder what on Earth he did?"

They leaned on their pitchforks, regarding the dog. The dog squatted, staring back at them warily. Some silent moments passed. When the demons made no hostile move, nor any move at all, the dog began to lick at the lava on his fur, worrying hardening bits with his teeth, keeping one eye always on the pair who stood watching.

Stinging smoke curled along at ground-level, like the ghosts

of snakes. The prostrate human soul took advantage of his tormentors' preoccupation, and crawled away, inch by inch, and soon was lost to view in the red-flickering smoke.

Pud said, "They just never learn, do they? That Damned Fool thinks he can give us the slip."

Zut said, "Yetzer will get him."

From nearby in the smoke came a blood-curdling shriek—the sucking sound of a pitchfork being withdrawn from fatty tissue. The dog pricked its ears.

Pud grinned evilly. "Yetzer got him."

They looked at the dog; finally Zut said, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"How do you torment a dog?"

"H'm."

"I've heard they bite."

The dog stood up, reassured by the relative peace and quiet after that walloping kick and his resultant vast flight. He gave his tail a tentative wag, eying the demons somewhat more warmly.

"Watch out," Pud said.

The demons moved back a pace. The dog followed, frisking a little. The demons clutched their pitchforks in front of them and retreated another step. The dog halted and squatted, tongue lolling, eyes now merry.

When the dog stopped, the demons stopped.

"You know," Zut said finally. "I think it wants to be friendly."

Pud scowled. "Watch your language."

"Well, *look* at it."

They studied it. It looked back at them, panting, eyes sparkling, tail thumping the ground and sending up little whirls of black ashes.

"You may be right," Pud said. "Go find out."

After a moment he said, "Well, go *on*. You can see he wants to be friendly."

"Why don't *you* go, then?"

"I'll see that he doesn't get away."

Zut skinned back his lips, revealing three-inch fangs.

"That's right," Pud said encouragingly. "*Ours* are bigger than *his*. Besides, there are two of us."

"Then let's *both* go," Zut said. He gave Pud a shove in front of him. "Follow me."

Together, pitchforks ready, they advanced toward the dog. Playfully the dog bounded away into the smoke.

A moment later he bounded back, straight toward them, eyes gleaming redly, barking at the top of his lungs, grinning a dog grin.

The demons yowled and started to run. Pud tripped over his pitchfork. Zut tripped over Pud. They tumbled to the ground, one this way and one that, dropping their pitchforks in order to protect themselves at close quarters.

The dog came over and sniffed at Pud's ear.

Pud moaned.

The dog dropped to his belly with a grunt. He licked the ear.

Pud flushed a dead white.

"You see?" said Zut, looking on in awe. "He *does* want to be friendly."

Slowly Pud's hand went toward the pitchfork beside him.

"Careful," Zut cautioned.

"I don't care," Pud said in a low, tight voice. "It's too much! Bless me, I—I feel *unclean* . . . to *think* that a damned soul would try to be friendly! I only hope nobody *saw*—"

"Courage," Zut whispered.

Pud's hand groped for the handle of the pitchfork, found it, closed on it.

He said a silent sacrilege. He leaped to his feet, raised the pitchfork high:

"Your damnation begins!" he roared.

The tines of the pitchfork swished down, entered the dog's hindquarters, traveled through the length of his body as through vapor, and emerged from the very point of his nose. No agonized howl. No agonized leap. He only blinked.

Pud looked astounded. He tried again. This time the dog leaped at the shining tines as they emerged from his chest, and seemed disappointed when his jaws failed to close on solid substance. He barked playfully.

Pud spat vitriol and tested the tines on the ball of a long-clawed thumb. "Now what do you make of *that*?"

Zut had rolled over and was sitting up, looking thoughtful.

"He doesn't feel a thing," Pud said sourly. "I don't get it."

Zut pursed his lips. "C'mere, boy," he said, masking his revulsion. "Nice dog."

Tail wagging, the dog went to him.

Pud shuddered and looked around uncomfortably. "Now you're displaying what almost amounts to—to *friendship*!"

"Well, I'm not enjoying it!" Zut snapped. "I just want him to hold still, so I can find out something." He led the dog over to the pool of red-glowing lava into which it had originally plunged. The dog eyed the pool doubtfully and pulled back a little.

"What are you doing?" Pud asked.

"Well, it just occurred to me—he didn't wail and scream when he fell in here. He didn't seem to suffer at all. And now he doesn't feel our pitchforks."

"So?"

"So maybe he isn't . . . well, I know it sounds crazy, but—maybe he isn't *damned!*"

Kneeling beside the dog, he thrust one of its paws into the pool of lava. Interested, Pud came over to watch.

The dog stood there, paw in lava. He whined in friendly, puzzled fashion. Zut released the paw. The dog commenced licking off the lava.

Pud passed the tines of his pitchfork through the dog's abdomen and shrugged. "I guess he isn't, all right."

"What is *this?*" roared the superior demon, glaring at the stern-wagging soul they had brought in.

They told him.

"What is *this?*" roared the Chief Demon, glaring at the stern-wagging soul.

They told him.

"What is *this?*" roared the Fiend in Charge of Torment, glaring.

They told him.

"I know what this is," the Devil sighed. "In fact, I've been expecting it to show up. First time I've lost my temper in centuries. Hand it over . . . I've already made the necessary arrangements."

"Well, *hello*, boy," said Saint Peter. "They told me you'd be showing up. Come on, now . . . no, not *that* way—not so close to the edge. *This* way . . . through the gates. You missed out on that bread, but there's a Heavenly steak waiting. . . ."

ONE WAY STREET

PETE INNES SKIDDED HIS '49 DODGE COUPÉ INTO A TREE AT fifty-five per, out along Northern Boulevard, one Monday morning. He was on his way to work in Manhattan from Greenhill, Long Island, where he had a ranch-type house, a wife, a dog named Prince, an eleven-year-old son . . . a life.

He started swearing as the car turned over. As the top crunched in, he was thinking, *Now why in hell should I black*

out for a second and side-swipe a tree? Going to die, damn it.

A little academic—but you get that way when you unexpectedly see the scythe coming. Your brain works faster than your glands: you don't have time to feel much, you only think: your first impulse is a kind of interest.

Luckily the impact of the sideswipe flung Pete over on his face across the front seat: the car flipped, and the top mashed down, but Pete didn't get his head broken—it wasn't there.

The car turned over again: Pete rattled back and forth between the seat-cushions and the crumpled top only a few inches away from his back. Metal howled; glass shattered, dispersing like water; a tire went *whop!* and then another. Pete's muscles wrenched agonizingly, particularly those in his back and neck.

The car lit upright and settled, rocking. Thousands of tiny squeakings for a few seconds. Silence.

Pete kept hearing all the noises, retaining them. He kicked until the left-hand door flew open. He inched himself backward toward it, and did all right until his shoulders reached the steering-wheel, which had been shoved back a foot nearer the seat. He tried to turn and crawl past on his side; he couldn't turn; the squashed roof was too tight overhead. All he could do was let out his breath, pull in his shoulders, and squirm.

His legs emerged, waved in air; he bruised a shin on the running-board. He screwed up his arms and shoved against the steering-wheel, which was now about even with his chin. He went out the door, his coat up over his head. His feet found ground, then his knees. He was kneeling, his cheek against the cold metal of the sprung door. Hating the car, he shoved himself away from it, hard, with both hands. He went over backwards on grass and dirt. He lay on his back, and brought his hands up to his face and started to cry.

A screech of brakes; footsteps running. Someone knelt beside him. Two hands touched his wrists lightly, as if they wanted to draw his own hands away from his face but were afraid to.

"Are you okay, mister?" a voice said.

The hands got rough. Pete's hands were dragged away from his face. Then the voice sighed, and Pete felt a breath of tobacco across his face: "Lord, I thought your eyes were cut up."

Now Pete was shuddering—long shudders that started in his abdomen and ran up to shake his shoulders.

Another screech of brakes. More footsteps. A new voice said, "Man, how'd he get out of *that* one! He okay?"

The first voice said, "I think so. He's half nuts. Shaken up.

Got the hell scared outa him . . . oh, I'm sorry, lady—I didn't see you there."

"I've had first aid," she said. "Move over. I'll feel him."

Pete found that funny. He began to laugh. Stopped. Hell with it.

There was a studying pause. A light woman's touch ran over his head, his jaw, his neck. Down along his chest. Ran over again, a little harder. It tickled. Pete laughed.

He got a slap on the left cheek that rocked his head; a slap to bring him out of it.

Shock to hysteria to rage. He said ten filthy words, most of them present participles.

The woman said, "I think he's all right. Some ribs broken—bad to laugh."

Pete tried to sit up. He said another few words—gasped them, rather, clapping one hand to his side.

The woman said, "Get down."

She helped him do it. He felt a crunching in his side. Pain was starting. He took a look around at the faces, saw nothing, closed his eyes again and waited for things to happen. He wasn't his own, right now: he was theirs. Social action was underway: policemen would come, and an ambulance, and he would be taken care of. People were focussed on him: it often takes disaster to do it, but that's when you're loneliest.

Sound of a motorcycle. Footsteps coming up, then going away at a run; the motorcycle blurted off. About that time Pete slipped into a pain-shot night.

The first thing that was wrong was the telephone in the hospital where he woke up about noon, the same day.

The nurse who was straightening his blanket said, "How are you feeling, Mr. Innes?"

He winced up at her. "Alive."

"Aches and pains?"

"They're lovely."

"It was a bad crash. The officers said the only thing that saved you was that you were pinned between the crumpled roof and the seat—you couldn't bounce around a lot. Except the steering-wheel caught your ribs."

"Has my family been notified?"

"I came in to see if you were awake. Your wife's waiting outside."

Pete sighed. "It'll be nice to stay off the job for a while and romp with my kid . . . as if I could romp!"

The nurse paused at the door, smiling a little severely. "You know, it's no help to put your identification in code, or whatever it was."

Pete blinked.

"Your wallet told us your name, of course—but you have your address and telephone number wrong."

"I don't get you."

"The phone especially—the address was almost right; 1801 instead of 1811. But the thing you have down for your phone number doesn't make any sense. There's no such exchange. We had to check with Information before we could locate your family."

"You're very pretty," Pete said slowly, "and evidently nuts."

"Thank you, and I'm not," she smiled. "You'd better get that straightened out."

"My identification," Pete said, "is in perfect order—"

But she was gone.

He lay there frowning.

The stuff he'd had in his pockets at the time of the crash was piled neatly on the table beside the bed. He reached over and picked up his wallet and leafed it open to his celluloid-covered card:

Peter M. Innes
1801 South Oak Street
Greenhill, Long Island
New York
Highview 6-4509J

It was absolutely correct.

The nurse had said it was wrong. Hadn't they *tried* it? The phone? She'd said there was no such exchange. There was a telephone on the table. He gave it a sour look as he put the wallet back beside it. Ordinary black French phone. Maybe a little more streamlined than most—

With a dial that went like this: A-123—B-234—C-345—D-456—E-567—and so on to J-000 . . . whatever that was.

He was staring at the phone and shaking his head when Mary came in.

Tears, of course. "Oh, thank God, thank God, thank God," she kept saying against his shoulder. The pressure of her against his side hurt, but he pressed her closer, thinking the same thing: *thank* God.

Then she was saying, "Oh, darling, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—"

"For what?" he said.

"The argument." She pressed against his side. "You wanted to die. I just know that's why you had the accident!" He couldn't help gasping at the pressure. She made a shocked sound and pulled back: "Oh, darling, I was hurting you—"

"Loved it," he said.

Her dark eyes were filled with tears, and she did something

she hadn't done in years. She bent her head so her hair fell over her face, and she brushed the hair across his face, lightly. He inhaled with satisfaction.

"You're not mad, then?" she asked through her soft hair.

"Mad about what?"

"The argument."

He thought a moment, hand on the back of her neck. "What argument?"

The hair swished across his face delightedly. Then her nose was pressed under his ear, and something else happened that hadn't happened in years: she caught a bit of skin between her teeth and worried it with her tongue. His hair lifted.

"Then you're *not* angry any more?" she whispered softly.

"I—" He gulped, feeling many things. "No, honey, I'm not mad. I—I've even sort of forgotten what we argued about."

"Oh, you *sweet*," she said.

With gentle force he removed the source of the disturbance, getting her to sit up. "This bed's too small for two," he said. "Besides, people like doctors keep wandering in. Cut it out, honey."

She got out a tissue and wiped tears away. She wasn't crying any more—just dry-sobbing a little. She sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand. "You get well," she said.

"Not much to it. Just a couple of busted ribs and some bruises, they tell me. I can leave in a couple of days." He looked at her with a fondness he hadn't felt in some time: maybe the accident had been a good thing. Maybe it had struck away some unpleasantness—or difference. Married for twelve years. Up and down. A kid. Getting on toward forty, both of them. She was still a darned attractive woman and he wore his years better than most. Lately they'd been—well, just apart. But now she seemed to have taken on flame, and it was welcome warmth. Let it burn. He could feel response in himself; and that old fondness. Flicker, flicker, flame—

"It was an awful quarrel, wasn't it?" she said. "I've felt awful for days. But it was my damned old pride . . . if you thought I was fooling around with Phil Tarrant, I wasn't going to try to change your mind."

"Phil Tarrant," he said vaguely. "Phil Tarrant . . . do you mean Phil Terrance?"

She frowned. "Phil Tarrant. Our next-door neighbor." Then she smiled. "Our big, bald neighbor, who's just about as attractive to me as a water-buffalo! Oh, Pete, how could you ever think I was having an affair with him? And I'm sorry I threw the picture at you—"

Pete Innes closed his eyes. His next-door neighbor was a big fellow named Phil Terrance. Phil Terrance had all his hair. He was a nice guy, happily married: Pete had never in his life said a word, or even thought a thought, about the possibility of an affair between Phil and Mary. *Never*. He knew damned well that Phil was the big, jovial type of guy that Mary found sexually unattractive. Besides, Mary wasn't the affairing kind: after twelve years he still had to employ the most delicate gambits or else meet a wall, and lately things had simply been *nicht*. Now, of course, Fate had struck a spark; the prognosis was good; maybe if he *had* suspected her of tramping, he would also have suspected that someone had done a fair job of velocitating her. But he didn't suspect anything of the sort, and he'd certainly never accused her of it.

It would all straighten out.

"What picture?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh!" She bent and kissed him. "You just want to pretend you've forgotten all about it! It's *sweet*! But don't. Let's admit honestly that it happened, and *then* forget it. Now—I'm sorry."

"I—I'm sorry too," he said.

Indirection was in order.

"Lucky you didn't hit me," he said.

"Well—" she grinned a little shamefacedly. "I really didn't throw it to hit. But it certainly wrecked the finish on the piano!"

Piano. . . .

He *had* no piano. They'd been planning to buy one, for Pete Jr., but they hadn't yet.

It was too much.

"*What* piano?" he said, half-rising against pain. "We don't *have* one. Mary, what in blazes is going on? I don't remember you throwing any picture. I don't remember any argument. Phil Terrance is *not* bald. I've never accused you of fooling around with him. *What's going on?*"

The doctor said, "It's probably only temporary, Mr. Innes. Amnesia induced by shock."

Pete said patiently, "Doctor, I do not have amnesia. There is no blank spot in my memory. I remember everything right up to the moment of the crash."

"Well," said the doctor, smiling, "I wouldn't worry about it. Not exactly amnesia. You've just forgotten certain things, and gotten others a little mixed up."

Pete said, "Like hell I have."

"You wouldn't *know*, Mr. Innes. You wouldn't *know* if you had things mixed up. They would seem real to you, even if you were seeing pink dragons. But—well, after all—" he

indicated the telephone dial—"you have described some other sort of telephone, for example. What can I say, Mr. Innes? I am fifty-seven years old. Since I was a child, telephone dials have been numbered in this fashion. They're that way all over the United States, I believe, and very possibly all over the world."

"They're not."

The doctor sighed. "You're a little confused from shock, that's all. I wonder if you'd mind talking with one of our staff psychologists—"

"I would."

"I've already taken the liberty of calling him."

"I resent that," Pete said coldly.

"You shouldn't."

"I'm as sane as you are."

"I'm sure you are. But he will be able to do a more expert job of convincing you that the things you imagine to be true, and the things you imagine not to be true, are simply as they are and must be accepted as such—because you *are* sane."

Pete reached for the telephone. He let his fingers think for him. He could make no sense out of the number system anyway. He dialed his office—not the number, but the fingerhole-sequence.

A voice said "Yes?"

Pete said, "Reilly, Forsythe and Sprague?"

Pause: "Sorry, buddy, wrong number."

Pete tried again, letting his fingers do the aiming. He dialed his mother's place in the Bronx:

"Mom?"

"Not that I know of," a man's voice said dryly.

Pete slammed the phone back on the carriage so hard the bell tinged. He lay back and closed his eyes.

Mary said—she was crying a little again—"Oh, Pete, darling. . . ."

Pete compressed his lips.

"You'll be all right. . . ."

"I *am* all right."

And the whole world's wrong.

"Of course you're all right," the psychologist said. "You're not crazy."

"Don't use kid terms on me, doc," Pete said. "I took psych in college. I'm not afraid I'm 'crazy'. I can describe the condition you think I'm in just as resoundingly as you can. But I'm not *in* it."

"Then you didn't pay attention to a very important point

in your psych course," the psychologist said. "It's the hardest thing in the world for even a trained person to apply to himself. You should know that a person who is illuded or hallucinated or subject to fantasies of any kind cannot be expected to—"

"So I'm—"

"—the validity of his beliefs—"

"—I'm not in a position to evaluate in terms of the real world," Pete said wearily. "*A priori* you're right, *ipso facto* I'm wrong."

"—needs outside assistance, don't you see?"

"*Caveat emptor.*"

The psychologist indicated the phone, as the doctor had done. "This is the real world. It exists. Evidence. As a lawyer you must appreciate evidence."

Pete Innes thought very deliberately and carefully for two, three, four, five minutes, while the psychologist waited, as psychologists do.

Then he said, "I suppose so. You *must* be right. I hope I sound sane. Phones have always been built that way. I have a piano. My wife threw a picture at me . . . what picture, honey?"

"The picture we took last summer of Pippy," Mary said.

Pete's lips tightened. "Pippy?"

"Our dog . . . our . . . don't you—remember?"

"I remember," he said. *Our dog Prince.*

"It should pass," said the psychologist. "Traumatic amnesia and fantasies. I would advise you strongly to see an analyst if it doesn't pass—you may not be able to recover all you've forgotten, but he should be able to—"

"Get out," Pete said.

"—and help you adjust." The psychologist rose. "I'll drop in later."

"Don't." Pete stiffened his body on the bed, wanting to leap and scream. "Get out, Mary."

"Pete—"

The psychologist said quietly, "Come, Mrs. Innes." He paused at the door. "You won't like this, Mr. Innes, but I'll naturally have to take precautions. In your state—"

"I understand," Pete said. "I accept. Have me watched. I don't care. I just don't want to talk any more."

The psychologist went out. Mary started after him, nose buried in tissue.

Pete felt two tears start down his own cheeks. Suddenly his eyes filled. He yearned. He was terrified and cold. His back teeth gritted together. "Stay, Mary," he said.

They were close on the bed for a few minutes, she lying on

his broken ribs and hurting them, he hugging her fiercely so it would hurt more. Pain was real.

She was crying silently, eyes and nose running—the way she cried when she was really miserable, not just being feminine. After a while she got up and went over to the window. The venetian blinds were down and slanted shut. “Maybe some sun will cheer up up,” she said.

Up went the blinds.

Pete knew he was in the New York Hospital. On the tenth floor. Looking out the window he could see the Chrysler building, downtown on 42nd Street, and beyond it, the Empire State building—with a slender spire atop it, like the Chrysler, instead of a never-used blimp mooring-mast and TV tower surmounting, good old Channel 4.

He screamed. It all came out. A large interne was in the door and at his side, looking wary, before he had exhausted the breath. Mary fainted.

Two months later they let him go home.

He objected at first to what was virtually imprisonment, but they said, “Citizens’ Protection Law, you know.”

He didn’t know. And he was a lawyer.

The psychiatrists were good. They worked hard. He understood that their fees were paid by the government—Citizens’ Protection Law. Well, fine.

They made him socially acceptable. They showed him where and how he was wrong. They brought in proof by the armload—books, photographs, films, actual documents and records of his own life containing mention of three jobs he couldn’t remember ever having held and numerous other interesting data, such as his former marriage to a girl named June Massey—

Once he had been engaged to a girl named Jane Mason.

They brought in the proof and talked to him about it.

They convinced him. They proved that the world he lived in was not the world he thought he knew. They proved that he was imagining. That he was occluded here, and was building dreamstuff of asynchronic data there. They proved that the Empire State building had always had a spire; that the U.N. had resolved the Korea conflict two months after hostilities had commenced; that Prokofieff—always a favorite of Pete’s—had not died in 1953 but was still alive, though ailing; that television was not yet commercially perfected; that Shakespeare had written no *Hamlet*—

He quoted from the play. They were amazed. They said, My God, you should write!

There were times when he thought he’d go crazy. Other times he was certain that he already was. There were still

other times when it was all a diabolic plot—Pete Innes vs. the World.

Heady conceit. For a madman.

Pete wasn't, of course . . . just a whim that delighted him, and concerned the psychiatrists, at one stage in his progress.

There had been no Shelley. He quoted Shelley.

Keats, they said.

He quoted Keats.

My God, you should write!

Still, they adjusted him. Physical facts talked.

But he never ceased to recall the world he'd imagined. It remained as clear in every "remembered" detail as this one, the real one, was in physical fact.

They adjusted him.

After all, he was an intelligent man. The theory of what had happened to him was clear: the actuality of it, once presented authoritatively to him, was equally as clear.

They adjusted him.

Now he knew what it must feel like to believe you are Napoleon. Long fall from the saddle.

Emotional acceptance came.

He believed.

Home was different. Well, he'd had to expect it to be.

Pippy was a cocker. *Prince had been a Collie.*

His house had five rooms. *Six.*

It was green. *Rust.*

There was a flower garden out back. *Vegetable garden.*

Pete Jr. was dark-haired. *Towhead.*

He wandered around, acquainting himself with his life. Some things were a lot different. There were shades of difference in others. Still others were identical, or so nearly so as to defy him.

His library . . . he went over it book by book, and came across his autographed copy of Bertrand Russell's HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY—the one he'd taken to Russell when the philosopher was in New York on a lecture tour back in '45.

He sat there, hugged it, cradled it, loved it. It was a remembered thing. Then he opened it.

He had *never* made marginal notes in that book.

But obviously he had.

Adjust.

That night Phil Terrance—Phil *Tarrant*—came over. Phil was bald. *Brown hair.* Pete found that he was evidently not quite so close to Phil as he'd been in his dream-world. He mentioned the golf games they had played together.

They hadn't.

Undressing for bed, Pete said, "Where do you suppose I got that world, honey? The dream one. It's so—complete."

Mary tossed aside her slip and swayed a little toward him, her dark eyes inviting, warm, soft.

"Forget your dream-world, Pete," she whispered. "This is real."

A much nicer, more open bit of enticing than he could remember Mary ever doing. He wondered what had triggered her, and thanked whatever it was. And she had a small mole on her stomach that he didn't remember.

They made the kind of vigorous, exhausting love they hadn't made in years . . . the years of his dream-world, at any rate. Now his still-mending ribs made it both a little difficult and delightful. They laughed at the necessary concessions, and had fun. This was a sweeter Mary than dream-Mary.

In the following days home from the office he spent a lot of time at the typewriter.

Doing?

He was writing a conspectus of the dream-world. He was looking for identities, similarities, antitheses in the real world, and noting them. He was pouring out his incredible fantasy before it should vanish in years.

He used a two-column system:

DREAM-WORLD	REAL WORLD
Jewish State: Israel	Sholom
FDR died in 1945	Same
Atomic power	Not yet
Stalin dead	Alive
Lautrec a dwarf	Normal

. . . and long pages of intense lawyer's analysis, drawing fine and significant distinctions, searching for historical bases for existing things and measuring them against "memories." The manuscript grew to several hundred pages. It could have gone on forever. It's perhaps easier to change a world than one's understanding of it.

Through this project, and the omnivorous reading it involved, he became closer to the real world. His analyst—he had consulted one, and now visited him twice a week—was thoroughly in favor of it. He learned. At first it was often shocking. Then only exciting. At last, enjoyable, nothing more.

Then it palled. Pete ceased writing. Six months had passed. He only read. More calmly, now. The need to discharge tension, and even a tiny lingering disbelief, had vanished.

There had been newspaper publicity, of course. At first just a little—then, as the sensational aspects of his case got out, a lot.

NEW YORK LAWYER
HAS DREAM-WORLD
Sex, Science and Sociology on
Another Earth

The *Times* did a dignified interview. *Life* gave him four pages, *Time* a column, *Scientific American* a squib.

Adjusted. And far happier than he'd ever been in his life.

Then they came and tore it all to shreds.

The dry voice on the phone said, "Mr. Innes, we've read about your case in *Scientific American*."

"Yes?" said Pete, wondering what they were selling or buying—he'd already signed for several articles.

The voice hesitated. "I don't think this should be discussed over the phone. May we come and see you personally, at your convenience?"

"Who are you?"

"Forgive me—I—this is all rather extraordinary, Mr. Innes. Most extraordinary. My colleagues and I . . . allow me, I am Doctor Raymond van Husen. I—Hello? Hello?"

Pete was staring across the room. At his bookcase. At the green-jacketed book entitled THE COMING CONQUEST OF THE ATOM, by Dr. Raymond van Husen, Nobel Prize winner. Van Husen, who in the dream-world had figured so importantly in the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge.

"Yes, Doctor," he said. "I've heard of you. What can I do for you?"

"What is important," said van Husen, "is what *we* may already have done to *you*, and what *we* may be able to do about it."

Pete clutched the phone so hard his knuckles crackled in his ear. "*Done to me?*"

"I—well, actually, *we* didn't do it to you. If our theory is correct . . . Mr. Innes, I think we had better come and see you."

"Tonight," Pete said harshly, standing alone between wavering realities. "Tonight."

Van Husen's grey goatee bobbed as he said, "Parallel worlds, Mr. Innes. Coexisting worlds. We believe that you are on the wrong one, simply on the wrong one."

Pete was sprawled in the big chair by the fireplace. Enrique Patiño, physicist, sat on the piano bench. Doctor Hazel Burgess, an attractive woman of fifty or so, was on the couch, sitting beside Mary.

Pete said in a dead voice, "Simply on the wrong one."

Mary said, "Pete . . . Pete, what are they saying?"

"They're saying I'm on the wrong world. Don't listen."

Mary bit the back of her hand.

Pete took a belt at the straight Scotch he held. "So your machine got out of whack," he said. "Somebody forgot to tighten a bolt, you say. It flipped on its mounting, you say. Instead of shooting its tight beam at the pretty target, it went through the side of the building, across Flushing Meadows and walloped me before you got it under control. You say."

"Not *our* machine," said Hazel Burgess. "Our machine radiated at the real Peter Innes, you see."

"That's either stupid or insulting," Pete said. "I think it's both, in fact. *I'm* Peter Innes." He took another belt.

"I'm sorry," Hazel Burgess said. "I meant that our machine radiated at the Peter Innes who belongs on this Earth. The machine on your Earth radiated at you." She stopped and bit her lip. "I *am* sorry. When we read about you . . . it was quite a shock to realize what must have happened—"

Pete stood up quietly and, without a break in his motion, flung his glass into the fireplace with every ounce of his strength. Scotch hissed on the burning logs. "Damn you," he said. "Damn you, one and all."

"Two Earths," van Husen said, looking at the blue alcohol flames. "Almost identical. Two almost identical experiments, aligned on the time continuum. Two almost identical mishaps. A transposition of Peter Inneses. It must have happened that way. There is no other satisfactory explanation. Very likely identical results as well. The automobile accident—the hospitalization—the . . . m'm—" He looked at Mary, caught Pete's eyes full-blast and looked away, goatee bobbing.

"Don't be a damned old Dutchman, Raymond," Hazel Burgess said. "My God!"

"Please go," Pete whispered.

"Perhaps we can help you, Mr. Innes," Enrique Patiño said softly. His wrinkled face turned toward Mary. The look he gave her was old and Latin. "If you wish us to, that is."

Pete swayed on his feet.

Mary got up and half-ran into his arms. "Peter, I *don't* understand—"

Mary? Was it *Mary*?

"Our experiment," said van Husen, "was an attempt to—"

"God damn your experiment. Get out and leave us alone!"

"But, Mr. Innes, we may be able to reverse the effect and return you—"

At last tears came. They rushed. Sometimes a man has to cry like a baby—when the world gets as fearsome as a baby's. Or when there isn't any world.

"He's been drinking since you called," Mary said, holding him fiercely.

The scientists left. And they left a card:

GRADEN RESEARCH INSTITUTE
Flushing, N.Y. 27 F-E 395

He became a meaningless man. A wrongness. Earth beckoned. His own reality called: called in a giant voice that sounded his nature like a taut wire, now that he knew.

He couldn't doubt.

Men of van Husen's caliber didn't speak loosely. They'd all seemed pretty positive. And, of course, it explained everything.

Earth called.

At times he felt alone in the Universe. This Universe. Mary lay warm beside him, holding him with body and mouth, and this Universe was an icy microfilm between them that kept him alone.

He became aware of a force. A tension grew in him, became nearly intolerable. *He shouldn't be here.* Originating in the farthest slow galaxies, transmitted to nearer ones, gaining amplification with every angry star, transmitted again and again, strong with the hearts of novae and the rioting pulse of variables, a complex of forces seemed to be gathering—forces that were trying to push him out of this Universe: as if he were alien, a dissonance. Fact? Fancy? Had he added one atom too many to the sum of this Universe? If so, he might break the gears.

Pete Innes, Universe wrecker. Once or twice he watched red sunsets, wondering if this might be the night of his nova. No longer alone.

Pressure.

This Universe was too much with him.

The little things closed in:

Eroica

Democrats

Trueorfalse?

Napoleon Symphony

Jeffersons

Trueorfalse?

This Universe hated him. Resisted him. Struck at him. Whether real or imaginary, the sensation grew to a torment and a terror. It lashed at him from directions he could not defend against, or even define . . .

Unable to sleep, he would pace in darkness, comparing his now-situation with his then-situation.

Earth II—he thought of this world that way—was preferable to him in many, many ways. He liked his job—he'd discovered that he was a partner in his firm—

But only one thing was important. The love and warmth at home . . . the new Mary . . .

He paced, and cringed, and thought, and cursed this Universe—and decided.

She cried when he said he must go back to his Earth.

He explained and explained. He wasn't her Pete. She wasn't his Mary. This wasn't his world. He could not remain here and stay sane.

"Oh, I love you," she wailed. "I won't let you do it."

"You'll get your own Pete back," he said heavily. "On my Earth he must be going through just about the same thing as I am here. The scientists will have contacted him. He'll be planning to return."

"I don't want any other Pete! I want you!"

That, he thought, *goes double*, and he went for a long and miserable walk. Nothing else to do.

He wondered if his counterpart, his *doppelganger*, was out walking too, feeling all the things he felt: the tearing need to get back to his own life-situation, but with specific regrets. Perhaps he'd even found in Mary *I* something comparable to the things Pete had found in Mary *II*. It was possible, in this intricate business of balances.

Also, he probably had a hating Universe on his back—

At any rate, there was no way out. Or rather, the *only* way was out.

And his double on Earth would be thinking the same thing, for whatever reasons. Identity. Or near identity.

He decided on one last week. Mary seemed reconciled. The reality of the situation, and its necessities, had at last become clear to her; or perhaps she had at last accepted it.

They spent that last week almost as lovers. They went out. Nightclubs, the theater. They had fun together. Their sexual encounters were spiced with a certain feeling of adventure, discovery. They had fallen in love for the second time, really, and they made the most of it—she perhaps unconsciously trying to hold him, he enjoying for the last time the woman Mary *I* was not.

The day they drove to the Graden Research Institute, he expected her to cry. But she didn't. She seemed to be thinking.

His tears? . . . They would come later, on lonely Earth. Best if she didn't know how much he cared.

The machine was bigger than he'd thought it would be. An enormous metal tube running off at a tangent from something very like a cyclotron. At the end of the tube was a metal ball about three feet in diameter, suspended on an equatorial axis. One round red glass eyelet peered out of the surface opposite the end of the tube—peered into a large, open-ended metal box, through which was strung an intricate webwork of wires.

"We wanted to send one atom—just one atom—into another dimension," Enrique Patiño said. "So, I'm almost certain, did our counterparts on your Earth. But we sent our Peter Innes

instead. And they sent you to us." He pointed at the two desks that stood back-to-back across the room. They were heaped high with papers. "We have computed. This has taught us interesting things. It would appear that one atom—and, believe me, our beam would scarcely touch more than one at a time—one atom will insist upon taking the organic whole of which it is a part with it on its trip between dimensions."

"I wonder if I crashed my car, then," Pete mused, "or his. Where's the thin red line? Molecules mixing, the vapor that is me mixed with the low-order vacuum that is the car—"

"His, we believe. It would be impossible to say for certain. It is our belief, however, that the phenomenon of transposition-of-the-whole applies only to living matter and all objects within the effective range of its electromagnetic field—"

He talked on.

Pete looked at the machine.

Was another Pete Innes, on another Earth, looking at a machine right now?

He hoped so. And he hoped the other was a good man. Mary II was a damned good woman.

"Where," he said, "do I get my ticket?"

"This way," called van Husen, from over by the metal ball. He'd been fussing with the round red eye.

"Shouldn't there be a fanfare?" Pete said sourly. "Reporters, cameras? Not that I'm in the mood."

"We—" Enrique Patiño paused. "Understand, Mr. Innes, we would like to delay your departure, at least for a short while, and question you about your Earth. We might have questioned you before, but we had no wish to invade the privacy of your rather peculiar domestic situation. We wanted you to come to us. Now . . . well, I'm afraid we will have to be satisfied with the observations of *our* Peter Innes. Our recent work indicates that it may be very dangerous for you to remain here. Dangerous for you—and for us."

"I've felt it too," Pete said. "Out of tune. I don't jitter right."

"We made our decision this morning. We were preparing to invite you when you came of your own accord."

"And if you'd invited me, and I said no, you'd have called out the Marines."

Patiño smiled an astonishingly young smile. "Oh, yes. Actually, we doubt that your introduction into our Universe will affect it for many millions of years. The disruption would have to proceed to fantastically high levels before it would make itself felt. But as scientists, we cannot take the chance

of letting you stay any longer. Your influence is theoretically cubed every sixty-one point o-four-six-nine hours."

"I'm not the same as when I came," Pete said. "I've shed millions of molecules. I've incorporated others. I'm wearing different clothes."

"We must predict some sort of compensating mechanism, and hope we're right."

"Then maybe there's no problem . . . aside from the way *I* feel?"

Patiño sighed. "Perhaps. But we know so *little* about such things . . . which accounts for the lack of fanfare. After you've gone we will dismantle the machine. The less anyone knows about this line of research, the better. Perhaps we are being foolish. But perhaps we should be terrified."

"Well," Pete said a little nervously. "When do we start?"

"Any time."

"When will *they* start?"

"When we do . . . or vice versa. I believe that identity on that level can be relied on: we seem to be expressions of Universal laws . . ."

"Now," snapped van Husen. "Let's not talk all day."

"If I could only take—a book or something," Pete said.

Patiño shook his head. He took Pete by an arm and stood him in front of the globe. The red glass eye pointed at Pete's forehead.

Pete had said his good-byes to Mary. He didn't look at her now.

It happened very quickly.

Patiño lifted a hand in farewell.

Van Husen pressed a button somewhere behind the metal ball.

Mary cried, "*Pete*—"

Machinery whined to instant high-pitch, drowning her cry.

Mary was in his arms.

The laboratory was about the same. So was the machine. The round red eye lost its brilliancy. The whining stopped.

Everybody just stood and breathed.

Holding Mary, Pete looked around and smiled. He said, "I hardly recognize you without your beard, Dr. van Husen."

Then he said to Mary, "I'm glad you did that. I couldn't ask you to."

Now she was crying. "I—I thought that if *I* did, then *she* would . . . or maybe *she* thought of it first—"

"You'll like *my* Pete Junior," he said softly. "And the Mary who just left here will be a good mother to yours."

The scientists were coming alive. Ten minutes of gleaming-

eyed inquiry followed, after which Pete said that he and Mary would like to get along.

Van Husen trailed them out into the corridor. The other two, an identical Patiño and a somewhat less attractive Hazel Burgess, were busy dismantling the machine.

At the elevator door, van Husen said, "You *will* cooperate with us, Mr. Innes?"

"With deepest gratitude," Pete said, and squeezed Mary's arm.

The elevator door opened. Inside was nothing but a steady blue light.

Van Husen said politely, "After you."

Pete said, after a moment, very quietly, "It's okay, darling—our elevators are different. Quite different."

Grimly he stepped off into empty blue space, five stories above the ground, Mary at his side. Van Husen followed.

They floated on blue light toward the ground floor.

Pete thought: *The only thing to do when you're going down a one-way street to nowhere is pull over to the side: I'll pull over here, I guess: I won't tell Mary: I'll keep quiet, and the others will too.*

His eyes opened wide: *How many others?*

Down.

The ground floor.

We'll just have to see if it's millions of years or tomorrow. Maybe this one won't have me.

It wasn't tomorrow. And it didn't.

SMALL WAR

DESPITE HIS MONUMENTAL CRIME, SANDERSON WAS STILL ONE of the best Astrogators in the Terran Space Force.

So, military men being the most practical of all men, the Court Martial Board offered him a choice: he must resign his Colonel's commission, thoroughly disgraced; or else accept a teaching position in the Space Academy, only much disgraced. In any case, he would never be allowed to go to space again.

He chose to teach.

Of course, the story leaked out. But the versions of it that got around were pretty distorted, many of them picturing Sanderson as a craven coward who had fled in terror—while in reality he was a quiet and thoughtful man whose enormous

crime had simply consisted in putting one foot ahead of the other in a slow walk.

Public approval and disapproval of his act varied almost directly with the understanding of Earth's history possessed by those who judged him. Many prominent statesmen and educators rose to Sanderson's defense; as many others pronounced his deed awful beyond belief. Scientists were likewise sharply divided—some nodding, others screaming agony.

Finally the stink blew over. Life went on. Exploration of our Galaxy went on.

And Sanderson taught.

They never could keep him from telling the story to his classes. He had chosen to teach mostly to be able to do so.

He would tell the story, usually, just before the young men whom he had taught were to graduate and become spacemen; and he would aim it particularly at those cadets who wanted to be star-explorers, just as he himself had been.

Every year, leaning his long frame against the desk in front of the blackboard covered with astrogational diagrams, he would address the group of soon-to-be spacemen before him. In his dry, slow voice—disregarding, as the story progressed, the looks of accusation that grew on some of the young faces watching him, and turning his eyes instead to those who seemed to understand—he would say:

Twenty six years ago, on June 11th, 2011, I landed my one-man Galactic Exploration Ship on a nameless planet of a nameless sun in the star-cluster Hercules.

You don't have to be told what I was looking for, for you will go out in search of the same things. (As always, Sanderson would address primarily the would-be star-explorers in his class.) You will look for worlds that can be profitably colonized, or mined for their natural resources; for off-beat data to be added to our knowledge of the physical Universe; for alien life-forms, if any.

While my ship prepared breakfast, I studied the planet through the view-screen in the cook-nook. It didn't look promising. Cold and white, ice-cliffs, forty-foot snowdrifts, low gray skies, scudding clouds, with a dying red sun riding a leaden horizon like a sorrowful eye.

Probably this planet didn't bear life—even a weed. And it certainly wasn't one we'd care to colonize. The only thing left to look for was resources—minerals and radioactives.

The atmosphere was high on helium, but breathable. I put on my coldsuit, checked my guns—two heavy rapid-fire pistols, their holsters stitched into the legs of the suit—and went out to do my job.

Scarcely disturbing the snow under my boots in the planet's light gravity, I set off toward the edge of the flat plain on which I'd landed. About a mile away, I stopped on a ridge and made sure my ship was sending. It was: *beep—beep—beep*. I went on, and lost sight of it within minutes. A long, wind-scoured ice slope stretched before me; several miles farther on, it crumpled into a welter of vein-blue canyons. It was snowing lightly, and the wind was frisking up—hard gusts that swayed me. I looked off in the direction it was blowing from, and saw a white wall, churning massively, reaching up into the blue-gray sky. Snow storm. A big one.

While I walked, the gadgets in and on my coldsuit were recording data. A camera clicked every five seconds, on my chest. Sensitive instruments were probing for deposits of certain minerals and radioactives. Before returning to the ship, I would gather samples of air, snow, rock, for general classification of the planet.

The storm reached me, a blurring, howling whiteness. Visibility became zero. Small, hard flakes streaked almost horizontally past me, tapping on the transparent plastic shell that covered my face.

After a while, I turned to go back to the ship. This world was useless . . . an iceball, bare of life, of interest, of anything we could use. I was ready to move on.

I had walked about twenty paces when the rushing whiteness parted for a moment, and, before me, not a dozen yards away, I saw a figure.

I gasped so hard that cold air burned my lungs. Almost without knowing it, I had one of my guns out, aimed and ready, my finger hard on the trigger to within an ounce of the pressure that would loose ten explosive slugs a second.

Then, as I stared, my gun slowly sagged to point at the snow-covered ground.

The figure wore a coldsuit, like mine. And a plastic face-shield. And the moment he'd seen me, he'd snatched a gun from a holster on his leg.

Slowly, his gun sagged too.

As if the motion had drawn a curtain, the snows closed in, leaving me standing there rooted, eyes popping and jaw hanging behind my face-shield, thinking, *Well, I'll be utterly damned!* . . . and trying to imagine, while the dizzying impact of the meeting was still in me, the mathematical probability of one star-explorer like myself running into another working the same sector of the Galaxy.

The chance was vanishingly small. Thousands upon thousands of stars in this cluster . . . God knows how many planets,

and how many square miles of terrain on those planets . . . and out of this infinitude of places to be, he and I had wound up on the same square acre at the same moment.

The same *century* would have been unbelievable enough!

They'll never believe this, I thought. *Not even when we both report it. They'll think it's a rib . . .*

Another hole in the rushing snow. The figure was walking toward me across the ice slope. I waved, and started forward. He waved back.

I shouted, against the wind, "Hi!"

He shouted back, but I couldn't make out his words.

The snow again—swirling whiteness. When it swept aside, we were almost face to face.

I think the sense of *wrongness* hit us both at the same instant. We both stopped in our tracks. Suddenly there was an iciness along my back that this snowball of a world couldn't account for.

It was the biggest shock of my life. I can hope for no other moment more stunning, more thrilling, more shot through with mystery and import.

He was an alien.

And so (Sanderson smiles as he makes this point) was I.

His coldsuit . . . there were differences. The cut wasn't the same. It was bulkier—or else he was. The fabric wasn't brown, like mine, but greenish. His gun was an alien whirl in his hand.

We stood there for about five seconds, each a bird and a snake. His eyes, long and goldish and slanting upward, were as wide and startled as mine.

Then I did a preposterous thing . . . and he did it too. There we were, two intelligent beings, representing two civilizations which quite obviously were scouting the Galaxy (I didn't think for a second that he was a native of this planet: no native would have required a suit and face-shield); moreover, two civilizations which were similar if not virtually identical in many areas.

Know what we did?

As if our strings had been simultaneously cut, we dropped flat on the snow and became almost invisible to each other. I squalled. I think he did too.

(Here some in Sanderson's class would always laugh.)

This, then, (the tall man would go on soberly) was the inauspicious fact of the greatest moment in the history of Mankind . . . the first contact with an alien race; the culmination of a flow of dreams and endeavor that had been building toward such a meeting, motivated by scientific curi-

osity and now by a sort of imperialism, for almost as long as mankind has looked at the stars. This was the dream of every star-explorer . . . at last, the discovery of a race of intelligent aliens—an almost *mirror-image* race! The scientific and philosophical implications were beyond imagining. . . .

And there we lay—he on one side of a low, flat snowdune, I on the other—practically wetting our pants from fear and shock.

The snow pushed across us. A minute passed. I was thinking, *A humanoid . . . my God, a humanoid! In a coldsuit! Oh, no . . . I must have been seeing things! Some kind of mirage. . .*

Another minute.

Sure . . . a mirage.

I poked my head up.

He had gotten the same idea at the same time. We widened our eyes at each other and ducked again.

. . . He *was* there. And I was. Together we were an impossibility. It wasn't much help to run over in my mind all the arguments against the likelihood of duplication of human form in even the *same* environment, much less in that of some distant alien world . . . Good God, the complex of factors! And it did no good to wonder at the probability of our encountering each other in this manner.

It had happened. It was stupefying.

But training will assert itself, and mine did. I stopped shaking, and began to think rationally.

So, evidently, did he.

We poked our heads up again, almost at the same time.

But this time, we didn't duck. We just stared.

Friendly overtures were in order, I thought.

I still had my gun out. I lifted it slowly above the level of the snowdune that separated us, barrel pointing not at him but straight up. I did this, hoping he wouldn't decide to blow my head off—or whatever that strange gun of his could do.

I looked him straight in his slanting bright-gold eyes and tossed my gun onto the dune, out of my reach.

His strange whirl of a pistol followed a moment later, coming to rest beside mine.

We looked at each other, eyes across the whiteness.

I let out a long, shivery breath and stood up. He stood up too. We mounted our respective sides of the dune and walked toward each other. I held out my hand, wondering if the gesture would mean anything to him.

He gave me a strong handclasp.

In terms of the far future, I think perhaps the most important thing that happened that cold, gray day on the name-

less world was the fact that I laughed aloud when I saw his *other* whirl gun holstered at his side. And that he laughed when he saw the twin to my gun at *my* side.

. . . but it isn't important yet. He and I, at that moment, could be unmilitary enough—*human* enough (here Sanderson would smile, as if to admit that the term might not exactly apply)—to laugh at those symbols of half-good faith. But nobody will know what that means for a thousand years . . . or however long it will take us to come into contact with his race again, whatever it is and wherever they're from.

For as we looked each other over, I lost my grin behind my face-shield, and his eyes became speculative gold flames. We were military men, trained, alert, observant; and we were equally thoughtful men, evidently.

We read each other in those few seconds. We read all our similarities, our identities—in dress, in weapons, in the looks in our eyes, in the way we'd responded to this fantastic meeting. We read each other's *worlds*, and the things that caused those worlds to explore space—and sometimes I wonder if he didn't do it telepathically.

We stood there, sensing the doom of our handshake. Two worlds—two civilizations, pushing outward through the stars—shaking hands, with those guns at our belts.

I released his hand, stooped to pick up my gun, and paused by him on the way to my ship. I looked back once. He had stopped walking to look back too. Then the snows.

TRACE

I TRIED FOR A SHORTCUT.

My wrong left turn north of Pittsfield led me into a welter of backroads from which I could find no exit. Willy-nilly I was forced, with every mile I drove, higher and higher into the tree-clad hills . . . even an attempt to retrace my route found me climbing. No farmhouses, no gas stations, no sign of human habitation at all . . . just green trees, shrubbery, drifting clouds, and that damned road going up. And by now it was so narrow I couldn't even turn around!

On the worst possible stretch of dirt you can imagine, I blew a tire and discovered that my spare had leaked empty.

Sizzling the summer air of Massachusetts with curses, I

started hiking in the only direction I thought would do me any good—down. But the road twisted and meandered oddly through the hills, and—by this time, I was used to it—*down* inexplicably turned to *up* again.

I reached the top of a rise, looked down, and called out in great relief, "Hello!"

His house was set in the greenest little valley I have ever seen. At one end rose a brace of fine granite cliffs, to either side of a small, iridescent waterfall. His house itself was simple, New Englandish, and seemed new. Close about its walls were crowded profuse bursts of magnificent flowers—red piled upon blue upon gold. Though the day was partly cloudy, I noticed that no cloud hung over the valley; the sun seemed to have reserved its best efforts for this place.

He stood in his front yard, watering roses, and I wondered momentarily at the sight of running water in this secluded section. Then he lifted his face at the sound of my call and my approaching steps. His smile was warm and his greeting hearty and his handshake firm; his thick white hair, tossed in the breeze, and his twinkling eyes deepset in a ruddy face, provided the kindest appearance imaginable. He clucked his tongue at my tale of misfortune, and invited me to use his phone and then enjoy his hospitality while waiting for the tow-truck.

The phone call made, I sat in a wonderfully comfortable chair in his unusually pleasant living room, listening to an unbelievably brilliant performance of something called the *Mephisto Waltz* on an incredibly perfect hi-fi system.

"You might almost think it was the composer's own performance," my host said genially, setting at my side a tray of extraordinary delicacies prepared in an astonishingly short time. "Of course, he died many years ago . . . but what a pianist! Poor fellow . . . he should have stayed away from other men's wives."

We talked for the better part of an hour, waiting for the truck. He told me that, having suffered a rather bad fall in his youth, considerations of health required that he occasionally abandon his work and come here to vacation in Massachusetts.

"Why Massachusetts?" I asked. (I'm a Bermuda man, myself.)

"Oh . . . why not?" he smiled. "This valley is a pleasant spot for meditation. I like New England . . . it is here that I have experienced some of my greatest successes—and several notable defeats. Defeat, you know, is not such a bad thing, if there's not too much of it . . . it makes for humility, and humility makes for caution, therefore for safety."

"Are you in the public employ, then?" I asked. His remarks seemed to indicate that he had run for office.

His eyes twinkled. "In a way. What do you do?"

"I'm an attorney."

"Ah," he said. "Then perhaps we may meet again."

"That would be a pleasure," I said. "However, I've come north only for a convention . . . if I hadn't lost my way. . . ."

"Many find themselves at my door for that reason," he nodded. "To turn from the straight and true road is to risk a perilous maze, eh?"

I found his remark puzzling. Did *that* many lost travelers appear at his doorstep? Or was he referring to his business? . . . perhaps he was a law officer, a warden, even an executioner! Such men often dislike discussing their work.

"Anyway," I said, "I will not soon forget your kindness!"

He leaned back, cupping his brandy in both hands. "Do you know," he murmured, "kindness is a peculiar thing. Often you find it, like a struggling candle, in the most unlikely of nights. Have you ever stopped to consider that there is no such thing in the Universe as a one-hundred per cent chemically pure substance? In everything, no matter how thoroughly it is refined, distilled, purified, there must be just a little, if only a trace, of its opposite. For example, no man is wholly good; none wholly evil. The kindest of men must yet practise some small, secret malice—and the cruellest of men cannot help but perform an act of good now and then."

"It certainly makes it hard to judge people, doesn't it?" I said. "I find that so much in my profession. One must depend on intuition—"

"Fortunately," he said, "in mine, I deal in fairly concrete percentages."

After a moment, I said, "In the last analysis, then, you'd even have to grant the Devil himself that solitary facet of goodness you speak of. His due, as it were. Once in a while, *he* would be compelled to do good deeds. That's certainly a curious thought."

He smiled. "Yet I assure you, that tiny, irresistible impulse would be there."

My excellent cigar, which he had given me with the superb brandy, had gone out. Noting this, he leaned forward—his lighter flamed, with a *click* like the snapping of fingers. "The entire notion," he said meditatively, "is a part of a philosophy which I developed in collaboration with my brother . . . a small cog in a complex system of what you might call Universal weights and balances."

"You are in business with your brother, then?" I asked, trying to fit this latest information into my theories.

"Yes . . . and no." He stood up, and suddenly I heard a motor approaching up the road. "And now, your tow-truck is here. . . ."

We stood on the porch, waiting for the truck. I looked around at his beautiful valley, and filled my lungs.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" he said, with a note of pride.

"It is perfectly peaceful and serene," I said. "One of the loveliest spots I have ever seen. It seems to reflect what you have told me of your pleasures . . . and what I observe in *you*, sir. Your kindness, hospitality, and charity; your great love of Man and Nature." I shook his hand warmly. "I shall never forget this delightful afternoon!"

"Oh, I imagine you will," he smiled. "Unless we meet again. At any rate, I am happy to have done you a good turn. Up here, I must almost create the opportunity."

The truck stopped. I went down the steps, and turned at the bottom. The late afternoon sun seemed to strike a glint of red in his eyes.

"Thanks, again," I said. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to meet your brother. Does he ever join you up here on his vacations?"

"I'm afraid not," he said, after a moment. "He has his own little place. . . ."

ANGELS IN THE JETS

IT WAS CHEMICALLY VERY SIMILAR TO EARTH, BUT MUCH smaller. It circled a nameless Class K sun in Messier 13, showing its one Y-shaped continent to the morning every sixteen-odd hours. It had mile-high green flora, hungry fauna, a yellowish-red sky that often rained, grey rivers that wound smoothly to a tossing grey sea. It had a perfectly breathable atmosphere—except for one thing. Because of that one thing, Captain Murchison G. Dodge had named the planet "Deadly."

Interstellar Investigation Team 411 had been on one of the seacoasts of Deadly for three days when Mabel Guernsey tripped over a huge, half-buried, clam-like shell. In falling, she struck her head on the point of a huge conch-like shell. Her oxy-mask was torn off, and Mabel Guernsey got the madness.

They locked her up. They walked her over to the *Lance* which stood like a shining three-hundred-foot trophy on its sloping base of brown-black obsidian, created from sand by landing-blasts. They took her inside and put her in an extra

storage compartment, and stacked crates in front of the door, and put a twenty-four-hour guard on duty to see that she didn't get away. For it became swiftly apparent that the one thing in the world—or rather on *Deadly*—that Mabel wanted to do, wanted most terribly to do, was to take off everybody else's mask so that they would all be like her.

Murchison Dodge, who was the *Lance's* physiologist-biologist as well as its captain, went off searching the surrounding ecology for some cure for the malady, which was in many ways similar to ergot poisoning. Like ergot, the condition was caused by the sclerotium of a fungus—airborne and inhaled, in this case, as a curious microscopic unit which Murchison Dodge thought of as a sclerotoid spore. Like ergot, it brought itching and twitching and numbness at extremities; but these were short-lived symptoms, and there was no ergot-like effect upon the involuntary muscles, so the victims didn't die. They only went mad, and stayed mad. From Mabel Guernsey's behavior, Rupert, the psychologist, deemed it an especially manic form of insanity. Mabel seemed very happy. She wished they could all be as happy as she. She was still trying to grab off oxy-masks when they closed the door on her.

So Dodge went searching for an antidote. He was gone for two days. And while he was gone, the night guard at Mabel's storage-room prison—a spacehand named Kraus, whom nobody liked, and who found himself stimulated by the proximity of a fairly attractive and provocatively irresponsible woman—pushed aside the crates, opened the door, and went in to do some tax-free tomcatting.

When Dodge returned, in the little one-man crewboat, the *Lance* was gone.

Far below, a patch of bright color—red, blue, yellow, purple, with the tiniest glimmer of steel to one side—told Dodge that he had at last found his wayward spaceship.

So they hadn't gone interstellar, thank God, or suicidally run the *Lance* into the local sun. That had been his first terrified thought upon finding the note they'd left and realizing what must have happened.

The note had been formed by large shells in the sand. It had been a hundred feet long. It had said: YOU'RE CRAZY. WE'RE GOING. YOU'LL NEVER FIND US.

And beneath, in smaller shells carefully selected for size and color, the names of the sixty-three spacehands and Team-members of the *Lance*.

Dodge sighed and cut the jets. He pulled the crewboat up into a stall. Its airfoils whined in atmosphere that was like Earth's, but almost twice as heavy. The green horizon of

Deadly slid smoothly off the bottom of the round noseport, to be replaced by copper sky and yellow clouds, and a hazy orange glow that was the sun—and at the moment of immotion Dodge released the chute. It whipped out, obscuring sky, clouds, sun. It billowed and boomed open. Dodge's couch and its empty companion to one side pistoned back deeply at the jar, slowly rose. Dodge half-sat, half-lay, his weight on his shoulders, looking straight up into the stiff white underside of the chute with eyes that were feathered with red and burning under dry lids. His hand went out to the button that would right the couch, but he pulled it back. The lying-down position was too damned comfortable after eighty foodless and sleepless hours at the controls.

The little boat drifted down, swaying on its lines, the apex of each swing allowing him a view around the edge of the chute. Copper sky. Yellow clouds. Hazy sun.

Back and forth, back and forth; and suddenly glimpses of green replaced glimpses of copper and yellow; the crewboat was among the giant trees. Each swing now revealed a wall of green and brown sliding evenly, silently, up past the port. Behind Dodge the cyclodrive hummed *mezzo piano*, out of circuit; Dodge's hand rested on the board, ready to drop the boat on its jets, should the chute tangle or be torn.

He started the gyro, and the swinging stopped.

He switched on the rear-vision screen. He blinked in astonishment at what he saw, down among the giant roots of giant trees, through he had been prepared for just about anything. He commenced to push buttons that controlled slip-strings. The boat's downward course altered, drifting left toward the clearing in the forest.

A last-minute adjustment brought it to rest on its fins in the center of a village square.

Wearily he heeled the pedal that would draw the chute back into its cubby, automatically repacking it as it came. Then he turned on the side-view screens, one after another, leaving them on to get a panorama.

They were all grouped around in a wide circle, looking up at the boat. They were smiling. They were carrying guns. Even little Jansen, the bacteriologist, who had often professed a hatred of guns, had a brace of handblasts on his pudgy hips. There had been dangerous animals howling along the seacoast; Dodge supposed there must be just as many back here in Deadly's vast forests. So the guns argued that the madmen were at least able to recognize that menace, and were ready to fight it for their lives.

The glimmer of steel to one side of the colors was no longer tiny; it was huge and high—and not complete. The

proud *Lance* had been partially stripped of her skin. There were ragged, gaping holes the length of her, with skeletal framework showing through, where great curving plates had been removed. Most of them cut out, Dodge saw dully, with torches. The *Lance* would never leave Deadly.

And the bright colors themselves . . .

Dodge felt a cold prickling back of his ears. The colors were giant fifteen-by-fifteen pine crates from the *Lance's* hold, a dozen or so of them, and the tarnished plates from the *Lance's* hull, along with some shining new ones from her repair stock—all broken-down, sawed-up, bent, buckled, leaned-together, bolted, welded, nailed, glued, painted and arranged in a mad travesty of a village.

Holes—windows and doors—had been sawn or battered in the crates; and judging by the array of bolts and stays visible on their outsides, some had two stories. They sat on the thick green grass like giant children's blocks thrown helter-skelter on a lawn. All colors and crazy angles; frills and frippery; scallops and gingerbread, ju-jubes and toyland, polkadots and peppermint stripes and bright checked patterns like gingham. Raggedy curtains in the windows, moving with the breeze, and a doormat, formerly a seat cushion in the *Lance's* main lounge, with WELCOME in drying orange. The walls of one crate-house were covered with purple and green and yellow murals whose jumbled, whirling ugliness could have meaning only to their mad creator.

The paint, Dodge thought, must be the petrolatum vehicle for the *Lance's* fuel, pigmented with the vivid clays which abounded on Deadly. It was splotchy, and most of it had run badly.

A little grey stream ran through the clearing—(Dodge had found the *Lance* by following waterways methodically up and down the continent)—and several slapdash garden plots were already under way. Beyond, at the edge of the clearing, was the heavy glass and metal heap of machinery that had been in the crates.

Dodge turned the gyro off, but left the slower starting cyclodrive on as precaution; he might want to get away in a hurry. His trembling, dirty hands found another control. The couch turned slowly vertical; the straps that had held him tight de-magnetized, and retreated into slots. He got up, swaying a moment on the spider platform beneath the couch, took a deep breath that had acrid jet-odor in it. Then he stepped over to the shaft, found the ladder beneath his feet. He descended to the airlock.

Through the transparent port he could look down fifteen feet to the ground and see them staring up at him . . .

Jansen, Goldberg, Chabot, de Silva, Mabel Guernsey, young Jones, Marian—his heart ached as he saw Marian's face in the crowd, lovely as ever and smiling vividly—Strickland, the four wide-eyed children, all the others. Standing in a wide circle whose center was the boat, and whose radius was the sharp-nosed shadow of the boat. Some presentably clothed, others incongruously clothed—like de Silva, who wore women's silk stockings and bathing-trunks beneath the dress coat he'd affected for social gatherings aboard ship—and many not clothed at all. Dodge saw old, dignified Rupert, who had evidently not elected to come watch the crewboat; Rupert stood nude some distance off in front of a crate-house, facing away from the crowd and crewboat, posing motionless with wrists crossed over his head and back arched. There was a puddle at his feet. Rupert was being a fountain.

Dodge worked the airlock mechanism, left the lock open a few inches, stopped it there; he had little assurance that they wouldn't blow his head off if they got the chance. First, of course, he put on his oxy-mask.

Looking out through the partly open lock, his voice nasal through the mask, he said, "You poor, poor devils."

"It's Dodge, all right," said Chabot, the *Lance's* Chief Engineer. He stood on the grass with his head just out of the shadow the boat cast, his body in it.

"It's God!" cried Mabel Guernsey, and prostrated herself. Several others did likewise.

"It is not!" said Chabot scornfully over his shoulder. "It's only the Captain!"

Dodge looked at Marian. She had moved to the fore of the crowd, where he could see her fully. She wore a halter affair, probably because her breasts had begun to sunburn, and nothing else except the Mercury-diamond engagement ring Dodge had given her. It glinted in the saffron sunlight as she stirred. She was looking, eyes sleepy, at his masked face in the airlock. He wondered bleakly if she even knew who he was. Her hair, unlike the matted dirty mops of several of the other women, appeared well tended; though her body was filthy, streaked with perspiration. Marian had always taken pride in her hair.

Dodge lowered his gaze to the sparkling black eyes of Chabot, who had come forward from the crowd and stood directly beneath the airlock. The man, Dodge remembered, had been a bit of a glad-hander aboard ship, always organizing and taking command of trivial activities; it was more likely that this bent had led him to a kind of pro tem mayoralty here, for he seemed to be without dispute the spokesman. Dodge began searching for something useful to say.

Mabel Guernsey lifted her face from the grass and peeped up at Dodge. Then she got to her feet, apparently having lost her awe of God. She began to walk around the boat, within the circle of the crowd, staring up at the sleek metal sides. Several of the children followed her, singing nonsense in small piping voices.

Dodge decided that formality might be best. He put his captain's crispness into his voice: "You remember me, then, Chabot?"

"Sure, I remember you," said Chabot, smiling up. His hair was curly and black as his eyes, with large flakes of dandruff in it. "You're crazy. You're crazy as a coot! You were going to try to make us crazy too!"

Dodge made his eyes icy, trying to frown Chabot down; then he remembered he was wearing a mask, and it didn't show. The frown remained, as he again tried to think of something to say.

"I got loose," Mabel Guernsey said, moving in her inspection of the boat. "Kraus came in, and I ran out, and he chased me. I opened the main airlock and ran outside. Kraus didn't try to close the airlock, he just stood there. Everybody else was asleep with their masks off. They all woke up happy, like Kraus and me."

"And then we went away," Chabot said, "before you came back. We hoped you wouldn't find us. We were sorry, but after all you're crazy, you know."

"Now you can't come out," he added, still smiling, "unless you take off your mask too. We'll kill you if you do!"

Every gun in the crowd came to bear on the airlock.

Dodge moved back behind the airlock door where he could watch them through the metaglass port. The port would stop a blaster bolt long enough to permit him to throw himself back out of sight if any shooting actually started.

So they'd made plans to deal with the event of his arrival. They were on the defensive. This would have been the most frustrating moment of all, had Dodge actually been able to find the madness-remedy he had searched for. But he hadn't, of course. It might take months of research and experimentation to produce one.

He couldn't help them. He couldn't help himself.

So there he was.

And there they were.

He was hungry. He hadn't eaten since starting back for the *Lance* after hopelessly concluding his search—almost four days ago. When he'd left the *Lance* the crewboat had had its regular stock of food for two days, no more. Now his stom-

ach was twisting into itself with hunger. And he was tired. God, so tired.

He looked out at the upturned faces, at the tall ruined *Lance* that would never leave this world, and thought that he must be one of the loneliest men in the Universe.

"In fact," said Chabot loudly, "you'd better take off your mask and come out right away. Take off your mask and come out, or we'll push over the boat and come in and get you!"

He stood, smiling and waiting. Looking at them, Dodge thought that the madmen must be eating, at any rate; Chabot still had his waistline. He hoped, with a sudden chill, that they weren't eating each other.

Behind Chabot, Marian turned away, moving with the grace that had always stirred Dodge so. She walked over and stared at Rupert, who was still being a fountain. He stared back, his iron brows crawling up. She pushed him over. She lay down beside him . . .

Dodge closed his eyes.

Marian and old Rupert . . . So the woman's passion he had so often sensed in her had at last, but too soon, found its release. Slow, black moments passed. At last he forced himself to open his eyes and felt a dull sour relief. Rupert, it appeared, was a little overage. He was back being a fountain, and Marian was sitting up, staring at the boat again.

The feeling of relief went away, as if it knew it was ridiculous, leaving only a small black hole in his mind, and sick futility, and a small, feverish voice chattering that this was good tragicomedy. He leaned tiredly against the airlock door. Behind the mask his face felt hot, was suddenly running perspiration. He found himself trembling violently, tight and clotted inside, his clenched fist pressed hard against the mask, cutting its bit into his lips, and his face was running tears too.

"We'll give you three," said Chabot. "On-n-n-ne . . ."

Dodge could taste the blood in his mouth.

The others took it up like a chant, all smiling, surging forward: "Two-o-o-o . . ."

Dodge sagged against the airlock and cried like a baby.

"Three!" Explosive, like "*Three!*" always is.

They milled around the boat, with Chabot, by furious shouting, finally succeeding in getting the effort organized. They shoved and the boat rocked on its fins.

Wildly Dodge went up the ladder. He sprawled across the twin couches to slap the gyro control. The gyro whined into action and the rocking stopped abruptly. He heard laughter from outside. He went back down the ladder to the airlock, in time to stamp on dirty fingers that clutched the very rim of the lock, trying to get a solid grasp. The man fell back, hoot-

ing. Looking down through the transparent port, Dodge saw that it had been de Silva, boosted on the shoulders of several others.

De Silva lay on the grass and grinned up at him. "Damn you, Cap, I think you broke my hand."

A woman—Susan May Larkin, Nobel physicist—came around the corner of one of the houses. She didn't walk; she hopped. She had a bouquet of alien flowers in one hand and her face was buried in them, and she hopped. Both feet together—crouch—hop! Both feet together crouch—hop! A big bearlike man, one of the jetmen, came around the corner after her, grinning. He took her roughly by the arm and led her back out of sight. Still she hopped.

Sounds—a soft tinny clatter that could only be pots and pans and other kitchenware from the *Lance's* galley, beaten upon and together—came from the darkness beyond a rough-hewn, curtained window nearby. A certain periodicity of pitch-change suggested that it was music. Across the village, out of sight behind the crewboat, a female voice began to *la-la-la* tunelessly, loudly, in the very uppermost register. The singing children stopped singing to listen.

Dodge said sharply, "Chabot, come up here."

Chabot shook his head. "And have you make me crazy? Uh-uh!"

"I don't want to make you crazy," Dodge said patiently. "Remember, Chabot, I'm still captain of the *Lance*. Come on up. I just want to . . ."

And his voice trailed off, with no place to go. He just wanted to what? He had no cure for the madness. Chabot down there thought he had, and was wary—but he had none. Use Chabot as hostage, then? Why? On threat of the man's death, he might force them to bring food to him. But even then the oxygen supply in the tank at his belt and in the boat's tank wouldn't last forever—or even for another week. And they quite possibly might abandon Chabot or simply forget him, and Dodge's threats would not avail. And Chabot wasn't going to come up in the first place.

So what could he do?

"All right," he said. "Stay there."

"I intend to," Chabot smiled.

So seemingly rational, thought Dodge. So well-spoken and logical, within their framework of lunatic action.

Deadly's swift rotation had moved the point of the crewboat's shadow along the perimeter of the circle-standing crowd, like a giant hand on a giant clock, marking off alien minutes on smiling, mad-eyed numerals.

His mind rebelled with sudden, almost physical suddenness. He must do *something*. Not anything constructive, anything aimed at brightening his incredible position, for there was absolutely nothing of that sort to be done. Just something, *something*. His mind screamed for action.

"I'm going to shoot," he said in a dead voice, "your damned silly village to pieces. With this boat's proton-buster."

"Oh, no, you're not," said Chabot. "We were talking about that." Without turning, he said curtly, "Jones—"

Ned Jones, steward and cook's apprentice, ran forward from the crowd. Lithe, slim, young, he sprang to the broad-leading edge of the crewboat's right stabilizer. Poised there, he got a foothold on the radar blister a little higher up. Then, one foot braced on the blister, leaning forward a little against the sleek side of the boat, he leaped a short two feet upward, bringing his head about level with the large oval barrel of the proton-cannon. He would have fallen back, then—but he speared one arm into the cannon's muzzle. His body sagged. The muzzle moved an inch downward on its bearings, stopped. The arm broke audibly. Jones dangled, laughing with pain.

"You see," said Chabot. "You're not going to do any blasting, Dodge."

Not so rational after all, thought Dodge. No, I'm not going to do any blasting. But not because that boy's being where he is would stop the charge. He'd just vanish—or at least his arm would—if I triggered. But I'm not going to shoot, because I couldn't do that to him. And because there just isn't any reason to shoot and destroy. Nothing but a crying tearing need to do *something*.

But what *could* he do?

So here he was.

And there they were.

Big lonely world, thought Dodge—and my oxygen won't last forever.

Marian was at the edge of the crowd again, staring up at the boat and at Dodge. Her halter had come off—he saw it back on the grass—and she was standing straight and tall and sunburned. She'd always been proud of her carriage, too.

The madness, Dodge thought, was like most others; it impaired value judgments, but not so much any logic built on the shaky basis resulting. Each person afflicted—Chabot, Marian, Rupert, whose evident desire to be a fountain might signify a great deal, gun-shy Jansen, whose wearing two handblasts might mean as much, de Silva, with his silk stockings—each had become a caricature of himself. The flood-gates were down, Dodge thought, and they were living out their unconscious, and so they were happy.

He still felt he had to do something. He had to act. A man should be able to *act*.

"I'm taking off," he said loudly to the upturned faces. "Stand back. The jets will burn you if you don't!"

Chabot didn't move. He laughed. "You're not going anywhere, either! If you try to take off, the boat will explode and you'll die." He stood there, hands on hips. "Because we put angels in the jets!"

He laughed again, at the look he thought he saw on Dodge's oxy mask. The laughter caught and ran through the crowd.

Marian spoke for the first time.

"Angels in the jets," she echoed queerly.

And Dodge membered Marian's knack with a pencil, her certain skill in doodling.

Angels. Always angels. Little chubby, winged angels—almost cherubs. She must have been talking about angels.

He watched her as, with that lithe walk and an expression of intense interest, she came forward to pass Chabot and vanish under the stern of the boat. Then he heard her crooning.

She sees the angels, he thought. So the madness included a powerful susceptibility to suggestion.

He looked up. Copper sky, yellow clouds. Giant trees, and a village. And he, almost cowering here in the crewboat—to the villagers, possibly, a kind of village idiot.

Big lonely world.

Take off? To go where on this big lonely world? And why?

He crouched by the partly-opened airlock, knees bent, fingertips touching the cold steel. There was a wariness in him, like a beast's. Behind him the gyro's whine, the cyclo-drive's hum, out of circuit, were suddenly the song of death.

What did a man live for? All Dodge's instincts jostled and shoved forward to point to one answer: that in the last analysis a man lived to live.

Maybe in ten years or so, a rescue ship would come searching Messier 13 for them. But it would be an almost hopeless search. And it probably wouldn't even happen, for Investigation Teams were presumably self-sufficient, and when not heard from, presumably lost.

"Yes," he said. "I guess you're right, Chabot. If I take off, I die."

He pressed the airlock mechanism. The sliding-door whispered the rest of the way open. Dodge reached up and stripped off his oxy-mask—quickly, without giving himself time to think—and breathed deeply once, twice, three-e-e-e . . .

He moved numbly to the rim of the lock, teetered there a moment on the edge of the world. His burning eyes caught

the small mirror set into the wall over the first-aid cabinet; he saw his own face, looked through its eyes into the eyes of the mind he knew, and said, "Good-bye . . ."

And even as he watched, they changed.

Soft tinkling melody from one of the houses touched his ears pleasantly. He turned, started down the metal rungs set into the side of the boat, thinking, *But I don't feel much different!* He stopped on the way to reach over and help Jones out of the proton-cannon. Together they jumped the short distance to the ground.

The crowd, now that the problem of the lunatic in its midst had been solved, had lost interest. They walked away, singly and in groups, chattering and smiling. Jones smiled and walked away too, clutching his broken arm. Dodge noticed with a start that Jones had two other arms—the broken arm and two others with which he clutched it. It was Jones, without doubt. But it was very strange that Dodge had never noticed those three arms before. Well, no matter . . .

Marian came out from under the stern of the crewboat, her eyes shining. Dodge wondered again if she knew him. She started to walk past him, hips swaying provocatively. He reached out and took her shoulder, bruising the flesh. Suddenly she was in his arms, flowing up against him.

"I like you too," she was saying hoarsely, raggedly. "I like you too."

They joined hands and began to walk. Marian, probably remembering the hopping woman, began to hop too, and soon it turned into a dance. Dodge joined in, laughing happily.

He bent over once, walking on all fours, just as they were entering the forest, so he could look back at the crewboat and see the dancing, darting figures of the angels in the jets.

THE BATTLE OF THE BELLS

IT WOULD HAPPEN MAYBE ONCE OR TWICE A WEEK—NEVER much more. Because things had to be just right.

For example, it had to be daytime for it to work. At night, nobody was likely to notice the chain hanging down with the handle on the end of it.

And the victims naturally had to be city folk. They had to be used to reaching around and grabbing and pulling without a thought. Because when you stop to think about it, a

chain like that in a place like that is about as likely as tits on a bull.

But it worked—it worked often enough to bring grins to the faces of any men who were around at the time, and enough to make the town women sometimes a little cool toward Charley Mason when they went in to buy things at his store, because it was strictly a man's joke, and Charley was the man.

Owensville is a little town in eastern Pennsylvania. It sits midway in a green valley, just a bunch of shaded frame houses and stores strung close around a main street. And that main street is part of the one and only road that leads through the valley—a road that all the maps show as a handy connection between the Penn Turnpike and some other major routes, when you're headed north or south.

So a lot of cars drive through Owensville every week—upwards of three hundred or so. And there's always a couple people in the mood to spend a little time in a restroom . . . the last Howard Johnson's is twenty miles back along the Turnpike, and the road down into the valley is bumpy besides, and you know what that does to your plumbing.

So they come driving around the bend under the trees and their car wheels thump the old wooden bridge across Miller's Creek—and once in a while one of them would pull off the road into the yard beside Charley Mason's General Store because they'd spot his crescent-doored outhouse standing there. Charley always kept it painted up so it'd be easier to see—clean white with a red roof—and over the door he'd lettered, big enough to see from the bridge, PUBLIC RESTROOM.

Then somebody'd get out of the car and go in, and a few minutes later the chain that came up through the roof would yank down as whoever was inside reached around and pulled the handle.

And that big old cowbell on the roof—the biggest and noisiest Charley'd been able to find—would dance around in the mounting he'd made out of an angle-iron, and go *Blongle, blongle, blok!*

After a minute the door'd open and the city folk would come out, looking puzzled and kind of sneaky. They'd give a glance up at the roof and see the cowbell mounted there. Some of them might grin at the way they'd been had. But mostly they'd get into their car and drive off maybe a little faster'n they would've ordinarily.

If it was a woman, it was five times as funny. Because some of the older men were always sitting around on the porch of Charley's store playing pinochle, or lounging down

by the bridge just talking, and when the woman came out they'd all grin at her sidewise and those who had mustaches might twiddle them a bit, and she'd get redder'n a peck of tomatoes.

Women drove off faster'n anybody, usually.

Some townspeople said it wasn't a very good way to advertise Owensville to passersby. But Charley said that a town of sixty two people didn't have to worry about advertising one way or the other—it just needed diversion. And since it was on his property, the cowbell stayed up.

It was just a gag. It never really hurt anybody. Charley, who could incline to philosophy when it suited him, said that the only person it could hurt was somebody who was plain ashamed of being human. On the personal side, though, he admitted he got a kick out of seeing them all blushed up that way.

Probably the outhouse and the bell'd still be there, and Charley'd still be getting his laughs, if the fat lady in the green convertible hadn't decided to do some praying.

It was a late July afternoon, and plenty hot. The sun was reflecting like yellow-green fire off the hills around, and everybody was staying in the shade today.

Charley Mason and Sam Knudson were sitting on the store porch playing gin, and Luke Yates was just coming up the steps, when they heard a car coming far off down the road.

Charley and Sam paused in their game, and Luke turned his gray head to look.

"Maybe this time," Charley said.

Luke Yates studied the dust cloud moving toward town above the tops of the trees.

"Coming pretty fast," he said. "Bet they drive right on through."

"A dollar," said Charley. "You bounce your inwards harder when you drive fast."

"It's on," said Luke.

Waiting, Charley Mason leaned back in his chair and half-closed his eyes—a lean, bald man in shirt-sleeves, the hand holding his cards relaxed in his lap. They could hear the murmur of the creek carrying away the runoff from last night's rain, and the air was sweet with the breath of the fields off down the valley.

"Rich man," said Charley, looking across the yard at his outhouse, "poor man. Beggar man, thief. In there, you're all alike in the eyes of God, I guess."

Sam Knudson nodded thoughtfully. "In the eyes of *something*, at any rate."

"All alike," said Luke Yates.

"Can't see your wallet from *there*," Charley said.

"Your brains either," said Luke.

After a moment, Charley said, "Some people's brains, maybe."

They all nodded.

A green convertible driven by a fat woman came around the bend, trailing dust, and it rattled across the bridge.

"New York license plates," Luke said, squinting.

"Yep," said Charley.

"Maybe she'll bite."

"If she stops," Charley said, "maybe she will."

The green convertible swerved off the road and pulled to a halt beside the store. The fat lady got out and looked around for a moment, blinking in the sun. She saw the three old men up on the porch and seemed to hesitate. Then she went around the back of the car and headed for the outhouse, walking defiantly, with her head up and her chin out an inch.

The men exchanged glances. Luke handed Charley a dollar bill.

"Do her some good, maybe," Charley said. "Snotty type."

"Like we didn't know how it was," Sam said, shaking his head.

"Or maybe," Charley said, "because we do. Funny."

Luke sat down on the bottom step and scuffed the dirt of the yard with a toe. They watched the cowbell atop the outhouse, and listened to the murmur of the creek, and heard a bird sing in the big elm out back of the store, and they waited.

The chain that came up through the outhouse roof yanked down.

The cowbell went *Blongle, blongle, blok!*

Charley puffed his pipe in satisfaction. He blew a big smoke-ring. Luke and Sam grinned. They waited for the fat lady to emerge.

When she did, a second later, it was looking puzzled as usual—but there was a difference. She stalked ten feet away from the outhouse, about-faced, and stared up at the cowbell. The men saw the back of her neck, between her white blouse and short, damp-looking curls, get red and redder and redder. Then she turned and came toward the porch. Her eyes were narrowed, her hands were clenched into fists, her mouth was a determined downcurved line.

She marched across the yard and stood facing the three

men on the porch. She put her fists on her hips and glared. Her eyes looked ready to pop sparks.

Luke and Sam stopped grinning. Charley's pipe drooped.

The sun beat down on the valley, the town, the yard, the outhouse, the fat woman. Her brow was shiny with perspiration. She stood there and turned her furious blue eyes on one man after another, like you'd sweep a gatling against enemy ranks.

Luke said uncomfortably, "Howdy, ma'am."

"You old lechers!" she said tightly.

Charley and Luke and Sam exchanged dismayed looks.

"Now, ma'am—" Charley began.

"Don't say anything, you old libertines," the fat woman spat. "I don't want to hear your gloating, oily voices! Of all the lecherous, salacious, lascivious things to do!"

"Why," Charley said doubtfully, "I reckon we're a little old to be all them things—"

"You're never too old to be filthy-minded!" she snapped. "Even if your bodies are too old for unGodliness!" Her condemning gaze raked them up and down, and she saw the cards which Charley held in his lap.

"Playing cards, too!" she said, her lip curling. "Well, I guess *that* follows!"

"Follows what, ma'am?" Luke asked puzzledly.

She saw the brown beer bottle resting on the box beside Charley's chair.

"*Alcohol!*" she hissed.

She stood glaring up at them, her breath coming fast and shallow, in a quivering half-crouch that led Charley Mason to wonder if she planned to climb right over the porch rail and sail into them physically.

Then, as they watched in wary silence, her anger seemed to slow off a little. Over a period of five seconds, her fists slowly unclenched, her breath slowed, she straightened.

She said in a low voice, "It's the work of the Devil. Anger is not the answer."

"The Devil, ma'am?" Charley asked.

"*He* has made you do this," she said quietly. "It is a device to keep lewd and licentious thoughts uppermost in your minds and corrupt your immortal souls. I guess I shouldn't blame you for listening to him . . . so *few* of us *are* able to resist his honeyed mouthings!"

"Ma'am," Luke said, "I don't think you should get so excited on a hot day like this. Maybe a cold coke—"

"I'll pray," the fat lady said. "I'll pray for the Lord to undo

this Devil's work. I'll pray that your souls be cleansed of the evil thoughts the Dark One has put there." Her pale blue eyes seemed a trifle fixed, and now she smiled, looking right through the men who watched her worriedly. "I—I'm almost proud that I should have suffered this humiliation in order to help Him in His work—it is a small price to pay, to have been the object of your lustful thoughts, if I can save your souls by telling the Lord what you are doing and seeing to it that He stops you!"

She gave them a pitying, sympathetic look. "You hate me now," she said, "but when you are pure, you will thank me."

She turned away and walked toward her car, head bowed.

After a second, Luke came on up the steps and sank into a chair on the porch. "Does lust mean what I think it means?" he asked.

"Guess it does," Charley said.

"Well, back when I *could* lust, I wouldn't ever have lusted *her*."

They watched her get in the car. She stayed quiet about ten seconds, praying. Then she drove off, head still down in an attitude of prayer, eyes up so she could drive. The car reached the other end of the main street, followed the road into the trees, and vanished.

Charley stared contemplatively across the yard at his outhouse.

"Work of the Devil, huh?" he mused. "Well, now don't that beat all! I bet Heaven would kick that prayer right out of court!"

"No," said a firm voice. "It was heard."

The three old men turned and saw a tall, handsome, blond young man, dressed in a neat and utterly clean white suit, standing in the center of the yard. His face wore an expression of perfect peace and unlimited love.

Actually, he wasn't *quite* standing in the yard yet. When they turned, his feet were still about four feet above the ground. As they watched, he floated slowly down, down, until he was standing before them, smiling a little.

At that moment, *timelessness* descended upon the scene—upon Charley Mason's store, the yard, the outhouse. *Timelessness* bounded the area from one edge of Charley's yard to the other, and from the road clear to the woods out back; and that *timelessness* extended downward to a perfect point at the very center of the Earth, and it extended upward in a widening cone to Heaven; and within its boundaries nothing that happened was visible to the outside world, or indeed

even "happened" so far as the outside world was concerned; for it all happened in *timelessness* . . . in one of those particles of time-substance which exist *between* microseconds on Earth's time continuum: particles so small that they are of use only to angels, who in their work must often get between people and their intended deeds faster than seems possible.

The young man's calm eyes looked into the minds of the three old men on the porch, and he saw no evidence there of any lewd or lascivious thoughts of the magnitude reported by the fat lady in her prayer. This did not surprise him, for exaggeration is the backbone of prayer, and the Heavenly Workers are used to it.

Closing his eyes, the young man contacted his secretary-cherubim in his office in Heaven. The cherubim immediately returned the dossiers of Luke and Sam and Charley Mason to the Heavenly Files, with no additional notations on the debit side.

That done—for nothing is so urgent in the eyes of Heaven as the latest data on souls—the young man turned his attention to the outhouse.

He saw the cowbell, and his lips pursed.

He left the porch, walking lightly, and crossed the yard to the outhouse. The three old men watched him enthralled, unmoving, barely comprehending, gripped by *timelessness* and a sense of wonder.

The young man opened the crescented door and went in. The chain yanked. The cowbell went *Blongle, blongle, blok!*

The young man reappeared in the door and looked at the old men on the porch. He pursed his lips again and shook his head in gentle reprimand. He disappeared again.

A second later, the cowbell and chain and angle-iron disappeared too.

The young man came out, dusting his hands with a white handkerchief. He came back across the yard and mounted the steps. He seated himself on the porch railing, where he could face the three old men.

"Shame on you," he said.

The men cast their eyes downward.

"The lady's accusations were quite excessive," the young man said. "Your motives seem not to have been primarily lascivious, and I have so informed Heaven. But still . . . don't you think you should be ashamed of yourselves?" He paused. "You may nod if you wish."

The men nodded, eyes dreamy.

"After all," the young man said, "isn't that rather a dirty trick to play on tired travelers who seek your hospitality?"

Charley Mason's mouth worked; his Adam's apple bobbed.

"Speak," said the young man.

"Gosh," Charley said in a low voice, "it was just a little joke. We never had nothing dirty in mind—"

"I know," the young man said. "I have discounted that element, finding you pure in mind. I am speaking of the unkindness of the prank—the discomfiture which you inflict on its victims."

"Oh," said Charley. "I—gosh, it just flusters them a little, that's all! I mean . . . *isn't* that all?"

"No," said the young man sternly, "there is more. Think a moment, humans, upon that common structure in the yard . . . think deeply, and you will realize that there is much more to it than meets the eye."

"Guess so," mumbled Charley.

"It is a haven . . . a place of solitude . . . a refuge for those who would contemplate without interruption, as many a weary traveler longs to do." The young man's voice was quiet, and his eyes on the outhouse were respectful. "In what other situation can you be so completely alone . . . in a perfect isolation not only permitted but sanctioned by your society? Why, humans, I could tell you of thousands of wonderful moments of piety, of philosophical reflection, of artistic conception which we have recorded as occurring under such circumstances, here and abroad. Beethoven, for example . . . but surely you must know what I mean, eh? . . ."

"I never thought of it that way, I guess," Charley said slowly. "Always did think it was sort of peaceable, though."

The young man looked at them soberly.

"In late afternoon," he said, "in the confines of the rustic privy, settled happily on the worn seats, feeling the homely dirt under one's shoes, hearing the quaint and natural sounds of the insects in the field, the gentle flutterings of birds from branch to branch . . . do you know that in this day it is one of the few places where one may flee for the inner life? Sterile city bathrooms cannot compare!"

The old men looked down guiltily.

"Here is ever a reminder of one's mortality," the young man said.

"It is Man in his true aristocratic state," he said.

"And yet at his most humble," he said.

"And now I will leave," he said. "I hope you have seen the light, and will no longer impose your crude joke on those who trust you for a moment's peace."

He stood up. "I hardly think that it was the work of the Devil, however, as the lady seemed to think—"

A cloud seemed to come over the sun—but there were no clouds, so perhaps the sun dimmed. The birds in the trees were suddenly silent. Even the rustling leaves seemed to pause. It grew still darker, and a chill breeze sprang up.

A head, whose face was dark and sharp and saturnine, appeared in the center of the yard.

As the young man and the three old men watched, a tall, dark, gaunt man in a neatly tailored black suit rose from the ground and stood eying them mockingly.

"Wasn't it?" he said in a thin, dry voice, and he laughed.

The young man's lips tightened. He said nothing. The three old men huddled back in their chairs, staring.

The Devil—(or rather, the black-clad man was only *part* of the Devil, since only on the biggest deals, like war, does *all* of His Majestic Lowliness rise upwards to Earth from His bronze throne in the exact center of midwestern Gehenna)—turned and sauntered to the outhouse. He entered.

A moment later, the cowbell and chain and angle-iron reappeared—but not quite as they had been. The chain seemed a little heavier, the cowbell a little larger and shinier.

The chain was yanked. The cowbell went *Blongle, blongle, blok, blok!*—a metallic sound of triumph.

The man in black came out smirking. He made his way across the yard and mounted the porch steps. The young man frowned and moved a shoulder so the fabrics of their clothing would not touch.

The man in black went to the opposite end of the porch and sat down in a chair there. He looked out over the bridge and the murmuring creek and the trees beyond and took a pipe from a pocket. From another pocket he took a live coal, which he dropped into the pipe. He puffed, and sulphur-smell filled the air.

The young man got up, sighing and bracing his hands on his knees. He stood for a moment, regarding the man in black levelly. Then he went down the steps and across the yard and into the outhouse.

Chain, cowbell and mounting vanished.

The man in black rose. He passed the three old men, trailing sulphur smoke from his pipe. They shrank back, eyes wide. He went down into the yard and toward the outhouse.

When he was halfway there, the young man emerged. They locked eyes, the young man's cool and determined, the other's hot and mocking and quite as determined.

They passed each other, saying not a word.

As the young man reached the porch steps, there came

from the outhouse a loud *Blongle, blongle, blongle, blok, blok!*—and he paused, one foot on the steps, lips thinned. He seated himself deliberately on the railing, and only then did he look around.

The new bell was still larger. It was shinier. The chain was heavier. The bell hung from a heavy cast-iron mounting.

The man in black came out. He sauntered back to the porch and sat down.

Half a non-existent hour passed—non-existent, because it passed in *timelessness*. The young man sat quietly, seeming to ponder; the man in black sat as quietly, smoking his sulphur; the three old men sat like mice, their eyes shuttling back and forth between the two antagonists.

At last the young man got up and walked slowly to the outhouse. The cowbell and its paraphernalia vanished. This time with a flash of white light.

The man in black dropped a new lump of smoking sulphur into his pipe and tamped it down with a thumb. He walked to the outhouse and replaced the bell with one twice the size of the former. He yanked at the chain, and raucous clanging filled the yard.

He came back, and they sat around a while longer.

The young man went out. The new bell vanished with a flash like diamond-blue lightning.

The man in black smiled and went out.

In an enormous mounting atop the outhouse appeared a three-foot bronze church bell.

Its chain yanked down.

BONG-G-GGG— BONG-G-GGGG— BONG-G-G-G-GGGG! . . .

The young man hurried across the yard, shoulders stiff with outrage. He got there so fast that the man in black, eyes mocking, was forced to stand aside at the very door of the outhouse to permit him to enter.

The church bell and mounting vanished. With a clap of indignant thunder that echoed from the hills around and rolled off into mutters.

The man in black resumed his chair on the porch. The young man came slowly back across the yard and sat on the steps.

After a few minutes, the young man said, "That wasn't very funny."

"I hardly expected you to think so."

"This can go on for an awfully long time, you know."

"I have," said the man in black, "an awfully long time. So do you."

"I think that it's rather a silly thing for you to be concerning yourself with," the young man said. "After all, it failed to incite these humans to any thoughts which could really be called sinful."

"Then it is an equally silly thing for *you* to concern yourself with, isn't it?"

"I do so because it discomposes humans at a time when they may be nearest to God."

"I concern myself for the same reason."

Another non-existent half hour passed. The young man sat on the steps, his white suit impeccable, face thoughtful. The man in black sat and smoked and smirked. The three old men waited.

Out in the yard the outhouse stood, a battleground of good and evil. Its coat of white paint gleamed in the sun, which still stood high as a result of *timelessness*. To the young man's moody gaze, the crescent in the door seemed a mocking, lopsided smile.

The man in black rose. He went to the outhouse. He returned. Behind him, he left a new and huger mounting, bearing a new and huger bell, from which hung a new and heavier chain.

More moments of *timelessness* passed.

Once the young man looked upward, as if for guidance.

Once he sighed and shook his head, as if discouraged.

"One of us must win," he said finally.

"Always," the man in black nodded.

"If I destroy that bell, you will replace it."

"With a bigger one."

"If you replace it, I shall destroy it."

"And then I shall replace it again."

"Do you really feel," asked the young man, "that so small a purpose is worth such an effort?"

"I might ask you the same question."

"Tiny building blocks may build a great edifice."

"The removal of one may contribute to its ruin."

The creek murmured. Out in back of the store, the bird in the elm sang a hesitant note, and then was silent.

Charley Mason said, in a tiny voice, "If those bells get any heavier, the outhouse is liable to collapse—"

The man in black turned his hot, mocking gaze on Charley, and Charley closed his mouth so hard his teeth clicked.

The young man said, "You need not fear him, human—only his temptations."

"Mister—" Charley said hesitantly.

"Yes?"

"Something sort of has me wondering."

"Yes?"

"Well—I've been watching you two go at it, and—well, it sort of looks to me like this other feller has the edge on you right down the line. I mean, like he was all confident, and you just don't know how to get around him—"

The young man nodded somberly. "It is true. Evil has only to *be* . . . has only to *exist* for its work to be done. It is a pit; you have only to fall into it. While to be good, you must exert yourself to climb *out* of the pit." He looked sadly at the smirking man in black. "He walks confidently, for he requires no more than your acceptance of him, your tolerance, your passivity, your apathy. How can such a dynamic imbalance threaten him? . . . he must only *be* to be strong; you must *act* to make him weak."

The young man got up and stretched his arms. He looked upward at the sky again, and seemed to be listening. He shrugged a little.

"It has been pointed out to me," he said, "that I have demonstrated sufficiently—now there are other matters to be attended to. I will destroy the bell once again . . . but mark these words well, humans: the Dark One will create another—and it, like all his creations, will be a potential for evil. Not a large evil, perhaps, in this case, nor an evil in itself by the simple fact of its existence . . . rather, his creations represent the potential of evil *within yourselves*. After he goes, I urge that you take down the bell and throw it away . . . destroy it . . . for as you have seen, he is powerless to prevent that. If he creates another, cast it aside also. Keep doing so. The bell is but the symbol, the temptation. The conquest of evil can take place only in your own souls; you must *act* in the face of that temptation. The battleground is not this town, nor this yard, nor that structure, but in *yourselves*. In you is the pit; in you must be the strength and will to escape it. Do you understand?"

Three nods.

He looked into their minds for the last time, to assure himself of their purity.

And in Charley Mason's mind he saw a tiny, half-hidden thought that struck him so forcibly that he almost smiled. Deep in Charley's mind, beneath all his awe and wonder at

the present situation, almost on a subconscious level, Charley's sense of humor was still working—the sense of humor that had come up with the cowbell joke in the first place.

Now, in Charley's mind, was a solution for the present difficulty. Not a solution, actually; for the realities of the problem were already solved—solved in the minds of the three old men and their firm resolve to do nothing ever again that would precipitate this kind of Heavenly and Satanic tug-of-war in the arena of their souls.

But it would end this business of bell vs. no bell very nicely. And not inappropriately, the young man thought.

He walked across the yard and entered the outhouse. The bell and chain and mounting vanished. This time the young man was gone from sight just a little longer than any time previously, and when he came out he looked a bit pleased with himself.

He waved in friendly fashion at the three men on the porch and rose into the sky, faster and faster until he disappeared into the sun.

The man in black got up from his chair and knocked out his pipe on a heel—or rather, where a heel should have been, for it was now evident for the first time that he had black shiny hooves instead of feet.

The wad of sulphur fell to the boards and smoked and stank.

"He was right, you know," he said. "The battle was in yourselves. And I suppose I've lost. I seem to be losing more and more these days . . . though I'm by no means through. But I suppose if I put up another bell, you'll just take it down." He sighed and stretched his long black-clad arms wide, as the young man had done. "Well, it's been diverting. I think I will put up another bell—just for the Hell of it."

He went down the steps, across the yard, into the outhouse.

An enormous cowbell appeared on the roof—four feet across, a prince of cowbells, a cowbell fit for the neck of Babe, the giant blue ox of Paul Bunyon. From it hung a two-inch-thick chain.

The chain yanked down, the cowbell went *BLONGLE, BLONGLE, BLOK, BLOK, BLOK!*—and the magic which the young man had worked before leaving the confines of the outhouse became evident—

And that was the end of Charley Mason's outhouse. The walls collapsed inward with a giant *roar* and an enormous *swoosh* and a gargantuan *gurgle*. A moment later there was

only a deep hole in the ground, the sides of which immediately crumbled in to form a shallow pit.

The three old men couldn't swear afterward, to themselves or each other, that it had all really happened. They wondered if they hadn't been dreaming, while Good and Evil had seemed to argue and tussle over the cowbell on the outhouse. Maybe an earthquake had swallowed up the outhouse, they thought . . . and that's what they told people who inquired; and they shrugged when people said, What earthquake?

But, deep down, they believed it really *had* happened.

And they agreed that it must've been the loudest flush ever heard anywhere—the flush that took the man in black and the outhouse and everything down, down, down through the Earth to land in Satan's throne-room in the exact center of midwestern Gehenna!

THE MAGIC TYPEWRITER

Mr. Joe Lyons
11390 Beech St.
Miami, Florida

Dear Joe,

I hope your sunburn is worse.

Here I sit in my grubby flat, shivering and creating Great Literature beside a clanking radiator, while you, you Madison Avenue prostitute, you agency hack, you reprehensible lying scribbler of TV commercials . . . *you* vacation on Florida sands and are propositioned by passing suntanned nymphs. I hope one of them gives you the clap.

Actually, good to hear from you, old buddy. With enough friends like you, I may still survive without whoring. Thanks for the \$100.

And how'd you like the pristine clean typescript of my brand-new typewriter? Bought it at a steal from a guy who was drafted . . . some improvement over the wavering squiggles of my old portable, eh? Just what every unrecognized Great Novelist needs—a gorgeous new office machine, so Editors can really read what they're rejecting.

Before I return to work, permit me a polite sneer. In your

last letter, you told me about Bill Lattimore's technique with reluctant dolls—namely, sending them poetically beautiful love-letters. You said his anger was to cram the letters with great romantic sentiments lifted verbatim from the minor poets of the ages— (minor, of course, so the chicks wouldn't be familiar with the quoted stuff). You said this knocked them horizontal. Well, fooey on the bit. I tried it on Millie Manning, that blonde steno in your office, for whom, as you know, I lusted (and do lust) mightily. I swiped a whole bunch of stuff from Elizabethan poets—wonderful erotic stuff, tasteful and witty—and I worked it in together with my own brand of inimitable, persuasive prose. It was the most masterful love-letter I've ever written. For all my hopeful efforts, I drew a five-word reply, by return mail. It was: Drop dead, you lousy jerk!

Now, if I can't hack that angle, with all my skill at word-smithing, then I doubt that your Bill Lattimore has achieved any better. Which is to say, he must be BSing you, boy!

Best,
Don Matthews

PS: Hmmmmmm . . . after a little more thought, maybe I'll try the bit once again, on this jazzy new typer. For the hell of it. It occurs to me that maybe Millie could scarcely *read* that letter I sent her, written on the old clunky machine. In trying to figure out the message, she may have concluded that some of the words were dirty, which they weren't. Just suggestive. Once again, best wishes, you capitalist bastard.

DM

Miss Millie Manning
1939-A Monroe Avenue
Chicago, Ill.

Dearest Millie,

It is I again, your devoted admirer, your humble servant, your adoring Don Matthews.

In the chagrined, heartbroken suspicion that you may somehow have misinterpreted the intent of my last letter, or even its content, I am emboldened to write you again in desperate hopes of convincing you of my deepest longings and most sincere emotions. Your radiant beauty stands before me always as inspiration for the task. And you will

note that I have even bought a new typewriter, so that no physical barrier may intrude between my tender thoughts of you and your thrilled understanding of my words. . . .

Millie, as I think of you! . . . as I see your sweet, pure face before me, like an angel's cloaked in my Heavenly mists of dreams, of hope! . . . I am ever inspired to poetry. My dearest, if you find me a clumsy poet, then you must look beyond the words, the meanings—just look closely, and in the meter of my rhymes, my lines, you will sense the pulsing of a love-laden heart that beats only for you. . . .

The gentle swan with graceful pride
Her glossy plumage laves,
And, sailing down, the silver tide,
Divides the whisp'ring waves.
The silver tide, that wand'ring flows,
Sweet to the bird must be:
But not so sweet— blythe Cupid knows—
As Millie is to me!

(Etc., etc., etc., and so on. . . .)

With love and devotion,
Don Matthews

Mr. Joe Lyons
11390 Beech St.
Miami, Florida

Dear Joe,
Chuckle, chuckle.
SUCCESS!

And am I *tired!* . . .

Once turned on, Millie revealed the salient attributes of a perpetual-motion machine!

Right now, I want nothing more than a double shot of rye and a good night's sleep. But I just had to sit down and bat out this note. Tell Bill Lattimore he's *got* something there. I made the date, wined her, dined her, necked her, and then—ahem—made the date. And she's cooled, too. Happily, I brought her quickly to the point of regarding the passionate episode as something that was *right*, and *strongly motivated*, and *healthy* and *natural*, and our *prerogative as man and woman* . . . but with no specific future or strings attached. So she's around, and that's nice, since I like to stockpile. Right now, though, I'm dying to try the angle on some other girls I can think of. In tired haste,

Don

PS: UGH! And OY! Mrs. Murphy, the Superintendent, just stuck her nose in my door, to make sure everything was all right. This, as you may recall, would be no great feat for Mrs. Murphy, even if she stood on the other side of the hall—her nose is that long. And I do not refer to her capacity for snooping into tenants' affairs, which is enormous, but to her dreadful physiognomy. Gad, do you *remember* that nose? With the wart? And the hair? Poor woman, with a face and body like that. At least, we are to *presume* she is a woman, though visual evidence is not compelling. Since Mr. Murphy was married to her, and seemed content in his depressed way, certain feminine apparatus must exist here and there amidst that mountain of perfumed blubber. Murphy wasn't a bad guy—a pity, his death—and his widow is okay as a Super, if only she'd stop trying to impersonate a woman. Anyway, to cut short this negative eulogy—she poked her wart in my door to find if everything was kosher, since she'd observed a "shadowy figure sneaking out the front door" at three in the morning (Millie). I told her everything was jake. Surprisingly, she seemed to dimly understand the actual circumstances . . . perhaps Murphy, on one or two occasions, closed his eyes and gritted his teeth and did something unimaginable to acquaint her with her biological self. Perhaps that's what killed him. Anyway, she gave me a knowing smile, like the grand opening of Holland Tunnel with two yellow teeth straddling the divider, and then she winked, a sight which would cause Rasputin to stagger, and she went away, seeming to squish and probe her pathway with the nose.

PPS: Ye GODS, what a night for eldritch events! First, Mrs. Murphy—and now, just a moment ago, the goddamnedest dream I've ever had! Lemme tell you about it—

After the mildewing Murphy left, I confess I fell asleep over my typewriter. Or possibly I slumped unconscious over it, after my last glimpse of her *glumfing* down the hall.

Here's what I dreamed—and, man, if you understand it, let *me* know. I'm worried. I don't have sufficient sanity to spare any.

Dream: I'm flopped with my head on the desk beside the typewriter, and suddenly this little green-skinned jerk pops right out of the typewriter and stands on top of the carriage, grinning at me.

"Doing fine with the babes, huh?" he says. "That Millie . . . she was a *b-l-a-s-t*, wasn't she! I enjoyed every minute of it—though you're a crummy lover, pal!"

I raise my head to stare at him. "Why, you cheeky little eavesdropping insect!" I growl. "Who the hell asked *your* opinion? Who are you? For that matter, *what* are you?"

"That ain't important," he says. "I'm your best friend, that's who I am. I'm an *imp*. . . ." He picks his nose and wipes it on his dime-sized loincloth. "Being mortal, you probably got cock-eyed ideas about that term and don't know what it really means. . . ."

"Term or no term," I say, more awake now, "are you *real*?"

"I'm a real *imp*," he says, grinning. "I live in this typewriter. For your information, chum, it's a *magicked* typewriter. It once belonged to Stewart Drew . . . d'you remember who *he* was?"

"Stewart Drew," I say slowly, kind of nodding. "The name is familiar. . . ."

"The ghost-chaser," the *imp* tells me. "The famous psychical researcher. He died just last year. . . ."

"Sure!" I say, snapping my fingers. "I remember . . . LIFE had a write-up on him! He was pretty big shakes in that field . . . one of the legit ones, a real experimenter, a scientist—not one of the crackpots!" I break off to stare down at the little green guy: "You mean—you *are* real? I'm not just imagining? You're a spirit who lives in a *typewriter*? . . ."

"Yep," he says. "Everything's got a spirit, friend. Every button on your shirt—every blade of grass—every grain of sand—every star, every nut and bolt, every *everything*. The old Greeks knew that—but now, it's kind of forgotten knowledge. Yep, I'm the spirit of this typewriter . . . and ain't she a *beaut*?"

I nod numbly.

"And," the *imp* goes on, "Stewart Drew did

some of his experimenting on me. You see, the old boy attracted and collected all kinds of spirits and elves and ghosts and dryads. . . ." His voice turned regretful: "He was a nice human . . . I really miss him. We were quite a bunch. Of course, we're all dispersed to hellangone, now that he's dead and his possessions have been sold and bounced all over the place. . . ." He sighs. "Anyway, the old guy experimented on me, using some Egyptian magic, plus a couple of Mayan spells. The upshot of it all is—" he peers up at me kind of defensively, as if expecting to be disbelieved by a non-psychical jerk like me—"anything typed on this typewriter comes true! . . ."

"What?" I gasp, staring down at him.

He nods. "That's the magic old Drew put on me, and I have to abide by it! As an Elemental, you know, my powers are unlimited—infinite. Anything typed on this typer, *I gotta make come true* . . . and I'm just the guy who can do it! . . ."

By this time, I know he's crazy—not to mention that I am too, for even believing that he exists!

"Of course, old Stew never *used* my powers," the imp says. "As an abstract researcher, he always strictly observed Magical Ethics." He places a finger alongside his nose, peering up at me: "I doubt if you will, however. . . ."

"*Great—gurgling—globs—of goose-grease!*" I whisper.

And that reminds me of Mrs. Murphy, and I start to come awake in horror. (Remember, I'm dreaming all this.)

"Just thought I'd tell you, bud," the imp says. He hops back onto the typewriter keys and starts to disappear down among them. "Have fun!"

I wake up.

I clutch at the edge of my desk and stare at the typewriter.

No imp. Just a typer.

"Imp? . . ." I say tentatively. My voice almost cracks. "Hey, *imp!* . . . are you there? . . ."

No answer.

That was half-an-hour ago, Joe, and a pint of bourbon ago.

What a helluva crazy, screwy dream, huh?

Or—*was* it a dream?

Knowing you, old man, your first words would

be, "*test it!*" So I'll beat you to the punch, as follows—

Joe, old pal, *within the week you're gonna be a millionaire!*

Now, how's *that* for a test? Be sure to let me know . . . and send a wad of cash this way. Or maybe I'll just type myself up a few million, eh? . . .

You know, I think I *will* play around with the notion. So I'm a kook. Also, bourbon is wonderful. I'll write a few girls I know of the damndest letters you could ever imagine. If any of 'em beef . . . well, I'll have my *old* typer set up on my desk, so nobody can prove a thing by typescript; and I'll be cautious about fingerprints on the letters. If the cops ask questions, I'll deny any knowledge of the sordid affair in outraged tones . . . I'll tell them to go track down the crackpot who's using my good name! Eh, what? . . . hein? . . . no? . . . good idea? After all, what rational man would write such letters?

Best,
Don

Miss Kathryn Darrell
56 Pointer Place
Chicago

Dear Miss Darrell:

We do not know each other, though I have seen your face on numerous magazine covers. I got your address through devious means, and my intentions are depraved. You will kindly appear at my apartment (address below) at 10:00 this Friday morning, prepared for passion.

Yrs,
Don Matthews
etc.

Miss Grace Langdon
4553 Terrace Drive
Evanston, Ill.

Dear Miss Langdon:

Though we have not met, you desire me greatly. I am the long-awaited answer to your erotic dreams. I enjoyed your

last appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. You can't sing worth a damn, but physically you are the most. You will appear at my apartment (address below) at 1:00 this Friday afternoon, prepared for passion.

Yrs,

Don Matthews
etc.

Miss Terry Shawn
79432 Inglewood Drive
Chicago

Dear Miss Shawn:

I was delighted to observe you shopping in Harris's Department Store, yesterday afternoon. You're loaded with biological goodies, though you appear to be the snooty type. I was even more delighted when the clerk, in exchange for a five-dollar bill, gave me your name and address from the Charg-a-Plate slip. I note that you bought lingeree. I shall take pleasure in removing it. You will appear at my apartment (address below) at 5:00 this Friday afternoon, prepared for passion. Also, bring \$5.00, since I am set in principle against paying for my women.

Yrs,

Don Matthews
etc.

Miss Dora Victor
1198 Beechwood Road
Chicago

Dear Miss Victor:

You have a lovely voice. I have never encountered a sexier voice in an employee of the telephone company. You are a good Operator. Let me assure you that I am one too. I enjoyed our little five-minute chat, and thank you for giving me your name—it enabled me to locate your address in the phone book. You will appear at my apartment (address below) at 9:00 this Friday evening, prepared for passion. However, don't come, unless your friends consider you to be more than usually attractive . . . I'll be tired by that time, and will require inspiration. Also bring a fifth of cognac and a loaf of rye bread, as I may need nourishment.

Yrs,

Don Matthews
etc.

Mr. Don Matthews
86400 Jerome Avenue
Chicago, Ill.

DON!—YE GODS!—BRACE YOURSELF!—IT'S TRUE!
—IT *MUST* BE TRUE! DON, BABY, HONEY SWEET, I
KISS YOU ON ALL FOUR CHEEKS! *I JUST INHERITED*
1,234,000.00 FROM AN UNCLE I HADN'T SEEN IN
YEARS! IT SEEMS I WENT *GOO* AT HIM AND PEED
ON HIS KNEE, AND HE'S NEVER LOST HIS AFFEC-
TION FOR ME! THIS IS FANTASTIC! MY GOD! HOLD
EVERYTHING TILL I GET BACK TO NEW YORK—I'M
FLYING TONIGHT! WE HAVE TO EXPERIMENT
WITH THAT TYPER OF YOURS! IN HASTE, AS I
PACK—

JOE LYONS

5:10 Saturday afternoon—

Joe, old man . . . I'm just sitting here, typing a few notes, trying to organize my thoughts as I await your arrival. I'm glad you're coming . . . I'm just tail-spinning from the magnitude of this thing!—and no doubt *you* are—but God help us, perhaps together we can manage a balanced view.

Yes, it is true.

Almost too fantastic to be believed—but it *works*.

This typewriter makes wishes come true.

Just type it out—and the resident imp observes, interprets, acts—and the miracle is a reality.

Every one of those gorgeous dolls showed up on Friday, their assigned times!

I've never had such a wonderful day in my life!

The doctor says my heart is okay—just over-exertion. He asked what I'd been doing, and I told him, and he said maybe I should see an analyst about the compulsion. I told him it wasn't a compulsion, just an experiment, and he said it was a wonderful way to die for Science and I should call him next time. Meanwhile, he gave me some pills, so I won't stagger when I get up.

So . . . it's all true.

It's frightening. And wonderful.

Joe, it means we can *have anything we want!* Do you want to own the French Riviera? Just type up a statement of ownership on this machine, and it's yours! Do you want a hundred-million more bucks? . . . just type it up. Elizabeth

Taylor? Type it. Me, I want Anne Bancroft. D'you want immortality? A visit to Mars? After *you*, old man . . .

We have so *much* to talk about!

Do you understand the enormity of all the *other* things we can do?

No more wars, Joe—no more insanity—no more prejudice, or illness, or poverty—or . . . do I dare say, *no more unhappiness, or even death?* . . .

We can re-make the world, Joe. On this magic keyboard. Thank God I didn't write an Armageddon story!

I'm going out for a fifth of Scotch . . . I need it. Maybe you'll be here by the time I get back, and we can lay our plans.

Don

mr don mattews.
apartmnet 2 B

dear mr; mattews

i came in to fix your radiatr you had complaind about. after i fixed it i couldnt help looking at what was in your typewriter—, i always wonderd what kind of stuff you write. i guess i dont know whuther to believ all that stuff about the typewriter or not but you make it sound prety good, so okay its worth a try. . . .

im a lonly woman mr. mattews, since ed died. i like you—i think your real neat—, you got branes and your goodlooking— . . . and i think youd be fun to go to bed with . . . and i'd like to have a husband again to help me around the place.

so. . . . i love you

and you love me

and when you come back from the liqor store your going to propose to me. . . . okay?

i guess thats all

except one thing. . . ., the typewriter. maybe youd better forget all about it . . . and your friend better forget all about it too . . .—and *i'll* be in charg of it from now on. i got lots of ideas about things i'd like to have. . . . like a new re-frigerater and a Caddilac. . . .

oh were going to hav a bal. . . .

MRS MURPHY

THE BAD LIFE

They made a sort of statue out of the spacesuit, just by not moving it, just by letting it stand there in the back of Turk's Repair Shop, right on the spot where it had gotten Thorens. Not that the rough men of Limbo were the type who'd have any qualms about handling an object with so eerie a history; nor did they consider it any kind of hoodoo—

It appealed to their sense of humor.

New convicts came to stare at it, and soon it figured in certain colorful practises of initiation. It came to be the subject of a spacemen's ballad, a vulgar ditty intended not to be sung but roared:

*Oh-h-h, Svenson's Spacesuit had a hell of a night—
It caught three men, and it mucked 'em up right!*

Goldy Svenson absolutely refused to have anything ever to do with the suit again, and so the Patrol issued him another without complaint, knowing that a Swede in space is more trouble than an Irishman once his superstitions have been churned.

The story of that night is no story, for it has no plot. Rather, it is a few nasty episodes whose only connection is a three-hundred pound, Mercury-steel, Space Patrolman's bulger. If one discounts diabolic intervention, it is simply a tale of coincidence. But, since you ask . . .

I

THE MAESTRO WAS OLD, VINTAGE 2080 OR SO. THE NEGRO contralto whose voice swelled from it had died long before that, around 1970. The song was a wiring of one of those antique modulated-groove "records" that gave their impulse to a "needle" and thence to a diaphragm-type speaker. Thorens could faintly hear the "surface-noise" behind the music . . . sweet and low, sweet and low:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child—

Thorens' discolored, half-closed left eye ached. He held his drink to his lips, elbow on table, his head bent forward a

little over the soiled cloth. This shielded his face from the lamp overhead and kept Turk and the others from seeing the tears that might trigger one of them—or all of them—into coming over and knocking his head off.

Far—far—from home . . .

Thorens' chin moved under its sandy beard as he tried to soften the lump that was hurting his throat. He took a quick unpleasing sip of the whiskey, winced as it knifed into his cut lips, set the glass on the table. Then he looked hesitantly at Turk, knowing somehow that the fat man was studying him.

Five months on Limbo had taught him that the best defense was a reasonable pretense. He cleared his throat and said falteringly, "Kind of gets you, doesn't it?"

Turk stared at him unwinkingly. Thorens' eyes sheered away, ran the length of the floor, up and along the dirty mirror that hung behind the bar—in it, his own reflection, dark shadows and smudgy faces, dingy chromium, the amber monotony of bottles, cigarette and marijuana smoke coiling, the spider-shaped bloodstain on the wall where the little Spaniard's high blood-pressure had geysered through his cut throat.

"It don't get me," Turk rumbled. He got up, wheezing, flat dark face glistening, carefully plucked eyebrows arched into the satanic shape that pleased him. "This is home. Don' you like Limbo? I like Limbo. Don' *you*? You make your friends feel bad!"

Thorens' head lowered again. Turk chuckled and moved to the bar—big, slow man whose bulk had no solidity but instead ran to pouches and blobs that bulged sleekly in Limbo's .63 Earth gravity. He thumped for a refill and Potts turned and said sharply, "Keep your pants on, black boy, I'll get to you *when*."

Watching them from shadowed eye-sockets, Thorens thought fiercely how stupid they were, with Turk a little more exquisitely so than Potts—and how he loathed them both, and feared them both, as he loathed and feared all the half-men here on Limbo.

Suddenly Thorens closed his eyes, making the shadowed eye-sockets darker . . . the old, old fear that somebody was reading his mind. Not really *reading* it, but detecting from visible signs what his thoughts were about. Covertly he brushed a hand across his forehead, up into his thin hair, down again, bringing with it a workable shield of hair from

behind which his eyes flickered, searching for the clenched fist, the boot, the knife—

Nothing. Shadows. Men drinking.

He released his hate. It filled his mind and exploded against the far corners of his skull. *Turk—fat strong-arm artist, with glands for brains! Potts—wife carver! Of all on Limbo, I hate you most!* His eyes flickered again. They hadn't "heard." He sat there, hating. *Why do I hate you most? Because you have hurt me most . . .*

"I ain't black," Turk said. He leaned over the bar, his belly rolling onto it like a squeezed balloon. "I'm a Turk."

Potts spun a beer at him. Turk picked it up and turned around. His muddy eyes brushed Thorens, and he decided to sit elsewhere. He went over to the front window, where there was a booth that Potts kept a little neater and cleaner because business was still business, even on Limbo. Turk sat down, inching himself along until he sat almost pressing the window.

Thorens was reminded of a captive hippo, stinking and streaked, looking dully through bars at a world it hadn't the brains to realize was there and strange.

"I bet he's a liar," said one of the men at the bar—(*southeast American, Thorens judged by his accent*). The man turned toward Turk, hand on knife. He was drunk and out to bury his steel—his left hand made the obscene challenge-sign. "Tell us what you are."

Turk didn't look at him. "No good, Sammy. We always got along, huh? Old Turk's too slow for knives." (He carried spring-knives up his sleeves, but the other was too far away. *Just a little closer, Sammy . . .*)

"Y'ain't too slow to bleed. *Say, 'I'm a black boy!'* "

Another man said, from the shadows, "Sammy, is it? Well, I'm a stranger here, Sammy, and I don't know you—but I'll tell you something. Turk there may be a black boy, but I *am* a black boy!"

Sammy's knife was out. "You know what else you are?" "Not slow."

They moved toward each other, coming to a crouch. Potts leaned over the bar and broke a bottle of bourbon over Sammy's head. Sammy shrieked and dropped his knife. He fled for the door, blood and whiskey masking his face.

The stranger drew back his knife for the throw.

Potts said harshly, "Outside, damn it! Why do you think I bumped in?"

Sammy slammed through the door. The stranger cursed and followed. Footsteps faded.

Thorens allowed his gaze to fall beyond the specter of

knives, out the window and across the glistening concrete roadway and the fog-shrouded fields of tobacco and marijuana to the spaceport. The gray shapes of its administration-building and hangars were beaded with faint strings of window-lights. Its cradles slanted up like fingers pointed at the stars—giant fingers that could unleash the Jovian lightning of rocket-power to reach those stars.

Now a glow washed into Limbo's thin air. It widened and brightened, beating down from the night. The bottles on Potts' shelves behind the bar began to vibrate. The trembling grew, and Thorens shifted as the bench tickled his rear. Men looked up, listened. Potts came around from behind the bar and went to stand beside Turk's table, looking out through the metaglass.

Turk said, not looking at Thorens, "Patrol ship. Maybe the crummy Hand got his transfer. Maybe he'll take off pretty soon. Maybe he wants a so-long present."

Thorens' belly twisted hotly into itself. He kept his face down, eyes in hiding. The whiskey in the bottom of his glass danced. His trembling hand forced the glass flat on the table, released it, fell limp. He sat and waited.

Outside, the glare was bright as day. High in the air a roaring pinpoint appeared, lowering, spitting out light like a fragment of the Sun. Fog boiled around it. Above it the sky was night. As the speck descended, night followed it down through the fog almost respectfully until, as the ship hovered over the pitted apron of the port, its rocket-glare had contracted to a blinding conical affair only a few hundred yards across.

Thorens dared to glance up.

It had been just talk. Turk's heavy features, disinterested in Thorens, were reflected in the window as he looked out.

Rocket-sound thundered, slammed, snarled. The ship touched a cradle, rocked, and the magnetics took hold to fit it tight. The pilot boomed the tubes once, unnecessarily—maybe he was just glad he'd worlded his ship. The boom lit the scene like a flash-bulb, then there was blackness into which the distant dim windows of the port slowly faded as pupils dilated.

Potts was back at his bar, setting up bottles, opening new ones and sticking spouts into them. Solar-system cash was good on Limbo. The wife carver would make money tonight.

A far, faint, dying bleat cut the night. Sammy's? Impossible to tell. Turk gazed dully out the window and Thorens wondered if the man could see in the dark. Nothing of the beast in Turk would surprise him. Turk had forcibly taken a girl, back on Earth—a very young girl—and while he might prefer

to be elsewhere than on Limbo, the preference depended on no major discontent. Turk functioned. There were the monthly supply ships, and the frequent stop-overs of ships making the Callisto freight-run. There would often enough be, with so many ships worlding on Limbo, a young and curious space-hand or cabin-boy who, prepared by the dark lonely months of space, could be persuaded to new adventure. And Turk could be convincing, even likable, when he put his mind to it. He kept, Thorens knew, a small hoard of handkerchiefs, buttons, dog-tags, carefully worded notes, personal jewelry, articles of clothing, each item of which served both as souvenir and occasional fetish.

With a hand that was heavier for the ring it had lost, Thorens picked up his drink, mouth twisting bitterly at the rim of the glass. His eyes closed again. He began to assemble words in the darkness, slowly, carefully, picturing them in the cramped pencil strokes that would be realized later when he returned to his office and added them to his manuscript:

The always dubious coin of sensitivity and intellect amounts to less than ever when you are fifty and undersized and alone in a cultural cesspool. Brutality it buys, without being tendered, and ridicule and violation, mixed to a poison whose taste is Fear—

No, no, no, he thought—too flowery, too abstruse . . .

He opened his eyes slightly. In the space of a second they went from side to side, registering the murky room, the men. Then they closed again.

If only I could join you, be one of you, just like you—without conscience or intelligence, as far from God as you are, as close to the slime. Then I would not be set apart—I would not be a target—the hare could run with the hounds. But I could never be like you, or anything like any part of you, you scum, you filth, you animals. I could not be like you in a million years. . . .

Sixty years ago the Solar Council, during the tenure as Chairman of the shrewd Ghaz of Venus, had been persuaded to launch Limbo as a money-saving proposition—a prison asteroid, undisciplined and self-sustaining, whose only upkeep would amount to the salaries of a few rookie Patrolmen assigned to orbit their ships within 'scope range and keep a bored eye out . . .

Ah, God! Thorens thought. *Why* had the Helping Hand sent him *here!* Why not to Neptune, or Ganymede, or Cal-

listo, or Tethys, for the frontier duties he had expected when he'd signed on!

—Council Engineers had scouted the Trojan Asteroids, selecting at last a body with adequate size and soil—one of the few fragments of Planet X's outer surface that hadn't been blown clean out of the System in that eons-ago catastrophe. Altering the asteroid's core to create a workable gravity, at the same time hopping it up to function as a central heating system, they had atmospherized it, deloused it of inimical micro-organisms, installed a balanced ecology and two weeks later blasted off, leaving some two hundred thousand crates of essentials on its twitching surface. Within another month, every male lifer in the System had been transported to Limbo to fend for himself, each new group being abruptly depleted on arrival by the settling of countless black scores. . . .

The Helping Hand! Thorens tore at the words with his mind, shredded them with hate. *The great HH!* Was he, John Thomas Thorens, on file in some drawer in some office on some level of one of HH's giant headquarters buildings in New Jersey, marked *Discontent—Refer to Transfer?* No, by all the nonexistent gods of Space—not even that! Not even a long wait to be endured, while the wheels of bureaucracy ground out his fate. The hated words boiled up out of memory: *Transfer denied. Transfer denied. Transfer denied.*

—Within a year Limbo had sprouted landowners, six slapdash towns, a caste system, inter-urban warfare, and a gang-rule throne whose cushions bore the dark stains of a dozen deposed. Within five, Limbo had shaken down. Gone was the throne, for none could hold it. Warfare had ceased (having been largely a matter of indecisive knife and hatchet forays anyway, no deadlier weapons being permitted). Famine and disease had at last brought the Limbos to the realization that pull together they'd damned well better, or die of perfectly natural causes. A Council of Limbo was formed, a Plan was drawn, some shaky, jury-rigged shops thrown together, some atrocious furniture and fair-to-middling ceramic-ware produced, and Limbo made an earnest bid for System trade. Sanctioned by the pleased Solar Council, a valid monetary exchange sprang into being, based on Solar dollars but subject to devaluation should Limbo need chastising. The spaceport was built, and a Patrol squadron moved in to sit casually on top of the new order. Limbo bought machinery, parlayed its gains, built factories, manufactured and exported mostly—of all things—toys.

The great HH! . . . which "Watched Over its Flock in

Distress and Disaster" (*Our Hands Are on Venus, and They're Helping on Mars*), but which could not bother to note the predicament of one lone, terror-bound field-worker, nor stretch red tape to free him, in its concentration on its main objective: Campaign and Collect (*And They'll Be Right There, When We Reach—the—Stars!*).

Thorens sought to assemble saliva in his dry mouth, wishing he could spit his hatred.

Helping along the frontiers, maybe, where the seed of publicity might be planted to bear plump financial fruit at home—but certain as death it was that no HH benevolence ever came this way, out across space to Thorens' rat-hole office on Limbo where he was a Beam of Light in the Outer Darkness.

—Eventually, there being plenty of room, the life-term inmates of the Tycho Women's Penitentiary were removed to Limbo, there to live beside and among the males to the satisfaction of both. Birth control measures, imposed by the Solar Council, found no critics.

Thus Limbo functioned—unpoliced, autonomous, even profitable. There was no slightest sign of moral or spiritual rehabilitation among its populace, of course. If the Limbos applied themselves to the matter of collective survival, it was only that they might survive as happy hellhounds in the biggest, goriest padded cell in history. Limbo outdid in sheer social savagery any lawless frontier that had ever existed. Frontiers always attract a percentage of misfits, outcasts and crackpots; but here was saturation. Dog snapped, snarled, chewed and eagerly ate dog. Murder was the way of life. To hear a scream was to shrug at somebody's clumsiness, for it is simple to kill quietly. To step in blood was to curse, for it rots shoes.

The largest town was Damn Earth. It had seven sprawling square miles of sloppily paved streets, three hundred and forty-two saloons including Potts', four distilleries, ninety-four gambling palaces, three toy factories, a general warehouse-store, several thousand scattered huts and cabins, seventeen whorehouses (possibly the best living to be made on Limbo), a psychotic German who lived in a cave and collected skulls, and the Patrol Spaceport, the latter being the only thing on the tiny planet that the Limbos had not themselves built. About the Spaceport was a network of tall silver towers—a crackling violet wall of death, if need be. But the Limbos displayed no tendency to storm the port, slay its personnel, blast off toward freedom in stolen ships—

They liked Limbo. It was their oyster, their raw meat, their cup of bloody tea. It was as vicious, as mad, as loose and

twisted as they. Paradoxically, it was their prison and the one place between Heaven and Earth where they could roam free, brawl, bay at the stars, kill, live the good life.

Any non-Limbo could, for this reason, walk the streets unescorted in perfect safety. His Visitor's Armband was his shield and security. If he happened on a scene of battle, knives would cease flashing to allow him to pass; and anyone so thoughtless as to threaten him would be cut down by friend and foe alike. For Limbo wanted no reprisals, no curtailments, no kill-joy Patrol teams stalking its surface.

The word regarding visitors was: Leave them alone.

This did not apply to John Thorens—

Who had arrived five months ago, with some thirty books, a few games (checkers, Spacelanes, Guess-an-Element), a three months' salary advance (bait conceals the point on the hook), and a twelve-week course (Encompassing the Humanities) under his belt that made him a "constructive and rehabilitative force among the unfortunate."

He had busily cleaned the HH office, rousting vermin, painting over filth in cheerful colors. He had then thrown open the doors to the unfortunate, a few of whom took notice.

All the books had been lent out the first day, but met their fates nailed to the walls of saloon bathrooms. The games had generated more interest, but the Limbos played rough—it had taken Thorens three painful days to force the little plastic *Spacelanes* ships out of his system. When at first he had sincerely tried to talk up the straight and narrow to these men, he was told that his predecessor had ended up in the quarry with his face torn off, because he'd had brown eyes and the Blue-Eyed Gang collected brown eyes.

(Not precisely so, other Limbos had told him later—the man had disrupted an orgy at the South Pole Arena, with loud complaints that these were Satan's activities. His more specific comments had angered female participants, so they'd dragged him back to Damesville, where, with luck, he eventually managed suicide. When the Patrol investigated, accompanied by an HH representative, they were permitted to discover evidence that the deceased had had a sideline involving a third H, with the catch that the stuff he peddled had been sugared down to sub-standard. Apparently a customer had complained. End of investigation.)

Thorens naturally had tried to get out. In reply to his first frightened spacegram, HH had said: *Unfortunate demise of predecessor due to involvement in prison intrigue unrelated to duties you are expected to perform. Patrol denies conditions you describe. Extend the Hand.* The essence of

the reply to his second plea was that in view of the contract he had signed it was to be hoped that he might experience a change of sentiment. Extend the Hand.

Outraged, Thorens had sought a more direct path to self-preservation. His HH card brought him to the desk of the secretary of the personal aide to the secretary of the Lieutenant Commander of the Spaceport—a bored-eyed man in neat civvies who had listened carefully to Thorens' story, managing at the same time to make Thorens feel like daddy's little boy, and then, glancing idly out the foot-thick, ray-proof, pellet-proof window at the twisting streets of Damn Earth, candidly admitted that Limbo was a bit rough at first, but, after all, *some* of the Limbos, at least, were struggling along the difficult path toward readjustment and certainly deserved a Hand, and all Thorens needed to do to insure his own well-being was to be friendly, mix with those who showed interest, and, above all, keep his nose clean.

To Thorens' last question, as he ushered the Hand out the anything-proof steelite door, the secretary had answered, No, Patrol regulations forbade any civilian communication over Patrol radio apparatus.

Thorens had next systematically buttonholed the captains of the freight ships that sat down every week or so—a simple matter of hanging around bars, since liquor was not permitted aboard ship. He would pay his fare—twice that—ten times that! But soon he came to anticipate their reply: No passage off Limbo without Patrol authorization, HH authorization, authorization, authorization . . .

They had seemed somewhat more understanding, however—and one in particular had sympathized. Thorens had promptly tried to stow away on that one's ship, believing he had detected in the man's manner tacit approval of the measure. He was caught and sympathetically turned over to the Patrol. Back in the bored-eyed man's office, he was told that that was scarcely the way to keep his nose clean . . . did he want to end up as a Limbo?

"What am I *now*?" Thorens said dully. "They are your prisoners, and I am theirs. Give me sanctuary."

"Nothing will happen to you if you keep your head."

"Do you know what happened to my predecessor's head? Do you see these bruises? Help me!"

"Roughed up a little, eh? Well, I'll tell you, I personally don't think too much missionary zeal will pay off here. Better just sit it out."

"The worst torture is the threats."

"You've been threatened?"

"Every moment is a threat. Every look is a threat. Everyone

I meet is a threat. It's not only the bruises . . . God, it's the *fear* of bruises!"

"Fear can do strange things to one's imagination, eh?"

"How often have you been outside these walls? And for how long?"

"I get out occasionally. I don't have much reason—"

"I've told you what is happening."

"Surely you've exaggerated."

Ushered out, Thorens cringed against the wall of a hangar, staring around through the ever-night at the vast, waiting, murmuring, neon-lit, death-shot psychopathy that was Limbo. Then he darted into the building, into depths cool with the presence of positives—discipline, order, repair, precaution, direction, rational quantities and qualities in rational degree. He veered this way and that through the darkened silver forest of Patrol steel—cranes, engine-pits, fuel storage tanks, machine-shops, great trolleys, giant vaulted ceilings cobwebbed with girders—and hid. Next morning he was found and ejected.

Temporarily unbalanced, he got drunk. Three bars later, he was smashed. A grinning Limbo shoved a weed under his nose, and Thorens experienced his first flight, during which he challenged three men to a fistic duel and won hands-down when they all collapsed laughing. This was the first, vague, exciting glimpse of the unique "value" he might have to the Limbos. He grabbed at it frantically. He stayed drunk for three days, and bought drinks for the house in every dive from Damn Earth to Saintsville, in an effort to buy more good will as a dividend. He bought pack after pack of reefers from the machines, and distributed them lavishly. He bought six kits of Harrigan's Horse (powder, self-heating water capsule, disposable hardware) in the General Store in Virtue, and gave them to those whom he considered his closest buddies. By this time he had attracted quite a coterie. They wound up their blast by driving to Virgin Springs, down in the southern hemisphere.

The fluorescent entrance-gate to Virgin Springs straddled the road like a Colossus, eighty feet high. It resembled some fantastic lily. Two plump, sensuously curved petals rose to form its outer contours, widening and deepening halfway up, tapering again to join at the very top. Thus a peaked, ellipsoidal arch was formed. Within the arch two smaller petals repeated the performance, rising, widening, then narrowing to join some sixty feet above the ground. At their juncture was an oval protuberance, perhaps ten feet in height, whose color alternated between glowing, murky red and fierce white-hotness. Two convex surfaces swept down and to the rear of the

inner arch, converging on the road to form the gate proper—about thirty feet high, fifteen wide—a great peaked portal bounded by the glowing concrete lips.

Thorens' Limbo companions whooped as they drove through the gate. Red light washed over them, from the protuberance overhead—then bright white, as it flared—then red again. The curving concrete walls closed in about them as they went through the actual opening of the gate. The motor-sound of their two-wheeled bug slammed back at them momentarily from the great lips. Then they were through. The Limbos were laughing and shouting. Thorens dared to open his eyes.

Inside, disagreement commenced as to where they all should go. They parked on Drag Drag to talk it over, but the creatures there became a nuisance with their propositions, so they drove on to Straightside and stashed the bug in a lot. Still nobody could agree on where to go.

Thorens settled the matter by taking over the controls of the bug and ordering everybody back in. He drove around and dropped them at the spots of their choice, with the assurance that he would pick them up—along with their tabs—in three hours. They had to direct him around, since this was his first visit to the sex city.

Alone, he parked on a side street some distance from the main stem with its garishly painted, unevenly lit, suggestively shaped concrete buildings. He closed his eyes against the rioting, vari-hued explosions of neon-light that smote him from every direction. Nauseated, utterly exhausted, he rested his head on the steering-bar and slept and dreamed.

. . . he was in a Rape House. The girls were lined before him, awaiting his selection. None looked over twenty years of age—(*plastic surgery; the youngest was 37*). They looked at him fearfully, trembling, shrinking. One whimpered. He looked at her. Her face twisted in terrified revulsion as she realized his thoughts . . . *she* was to be the one. She screamed and turned to flee. The dike matron caught her, grinning. Thorens took her by the hair, brutally, and dragged her toward the staircase. She shrieked and pleaded and then attacked his eyes with her fingernails . . . he evaded easily, and no drop of blood was drawn. Physically (*minor surgery*) and psychologically (*drugs*) reduced to innocent virginity, she fought him all the way up the stairs . . . not *quite* escaping him; not *quite* harming him. He spun her through the door of a room whose floor was wall-to-wall mattress. She bolted for the door; he struck her in the mouth. (*Her name was Lucia Chavez; she was on Limbo for the Murder of two husbands; she was 52 years of age; she was on call, as were all the*

"virgins," only once a week, leaving time for the virginity-operation and minor accelerated healing.) As Thorens removed his clothing, she went on her knees before him and screamed tearfully up into his face. She screamed her fear of motherhood (another bait for sadism). He screamed something back at her, and, in his half-nude state, turned and fled. . . .

. . . he was in a Fetish Palace. While his girl stood at his side caressing him, he looked through the catalogue. He chose mostly tri-di figuregraphs of men degrading women. His girl smiled warmly, eyes promising that it would be that way. He also chose a heavy, boned brassiere—white, pure, not maidenly but matronly. As the attendant brought one out of stock, the girl laughed. Thorens struck her and fled. . . .

. . . he was in a Voyeur Palace. He wandered the dark, twisting corridors, peering through the one-way glass at the brightly-lit arenas beyond. The human couples soon proved boring—the animals were more interesting. That one over there, medium-sized, heavily furred—the one with the coarse-faced statuesque blond—surely that was a weasel. How had they bred one so large? How had they trained it? And that other one, awaiting its turn in the shadows . . . a cinnamon bear? Thorens became interested in the animals. There were many he could not name. Some of them inflicted minor, instinctive bites on the women they were with—the women pretended fear and agony—Thorens watched avidly. An orangutan appeared to be strangling its woman—Thorens pressed close to that window. The woman looked in Thorens' direction and seemed to plead for help (she did it like clockwork, to catch all the watchers). Thorens laughed—then he stopped. *Her face* . . . it was young, sweet, innocent, pure; the face of a madonna, Thorens thought. Was there a child in the shadows? He shrank back. What was that lovely creature doing in there, submitting to an ape? Why should such a pure, sweet woman submit to *anything*? Thorens fled. . . .

He woke up. He raised his head from the steering-bar of the bug, looking around for the source of the sound that had waked him. A woman was knocking on the plastic shell of the bug. Thorens peered out at her, blearily, warily. She was of average height, well built, young-looking—a pretty face, if a little hard around the jaw; blue eyes with a tiredness at the corners; wide, soft mouth. She smiled at Thorens. She held up a card-case and took out a plasticopy of her Clean-Certificate, offering it as reassurance. (If he took it, and her, the Certificate meant that he would receive free cure for anything he probably wouldn't get. It also meant that she wasn't an independent Walker, but rather was On-Penalty

from one of the houses for any of a variety of offenses—such as hitting a customer back, or deflating him with mirth at odd procedures.)

None of this Thorens could know, as a newcomer. He saw only the girl—the curves of hips and breasts outlined against the glaring neon backdrop—the inviting eyes and smiling face, more attractive than it deserved to be in the half-light—

Aroused—violently, surprisingly so—he opened the door of the bug. As the girl started to get in, he grabbed her wrist and dragged roughly. She sprawled across the front seat, her head glancing off the steering column to land in his lap. Her lips twisted in the darkness—she knew her first acts. She held up her Certificate for him to take. Not knowing what to do with it, or what it was, he crumpled it viciously to the floor.

“Five?” he said.

She nodded her head against his lap. On-Penalty, she was in no position to bargain. Ready, she caressed him.

“No,” he grated.

Instead, he slammed a lever with the heel of his hand, and the right-side front seat folded back to join with the rear, making a bedsurface. He took the girl by the shoulders and forced her up, around, down flat. “Be cheap,” he moaned. “You *are* cheap! *Be* cheap. You filth, you bitch, you lousy whore. . . .”

Obediently she groaned, wriggled, and spat obscenity as he sufficiently undressed her. Her obscene commentary re-doubled as he sufficiently undressed himself. If he had been able to see better in the darkness, he would have found her eyes bored.

He crawled upon her, and then was unable. After two minutes of her techniques, he was able. Considering the victory his, a T.K.O. of decent sensibilities, he wound things up violently, without hesitation, without joy. Then he rolled aside to cover himself up and display anxiety-breathing (repressed sobbing). She made the standard offer of a drug-and-vitamin re-load pill . . . he stared at it, not knowing what it was; when she told him, he refused it. Still breathing hard, he grinned wisely at her in the murk: “You’re pretty good, kid . . . the best I’ve had around here!”

. . . the only, the first, the last on Limbo . . . far from the whores of Mother Earth . . . the specter of a fat man, and daydreams almost real at night in bittersweet self-play. . . .

“Thanks.” Having rearranged herself, she held out her hand for the fiver.

He gave it to her. “Maybe I’ll be back, kid.” He heaved a

great sigh (repressed scream) and paid several shivery obscene compliments to her talents.

"Thanks." She started to climb out of the bug. He patted her rear roughly—the recent, trivial receptacle of his joy. She paused to look at him curiously: *You won't be back. Jesus, don't you know when you're crying?*

She walked off into the darkness, the neon. Gratification of manhood had made Thorens sleepy. Rubbing his milked glands, he dozed. Rousing twice, he drank from various of the bottles on the floor of the bug. He got sicker—his breathing harshened; his eyes wouldn't uncross. Bottle in hand, he pressed his nose against the inside of the bug's shell, staring out at the active night. Fear returned—the familiar mind-mate. Limbo was back with him—the uncertainty, other certainties, the maniacs, the inner hiding, pain. . . . he drank again. Now all the bottles were empty. He started the bug; it was time.

When he picked up his cronies, and had paid for their pleasures, he was utterly broke (until his next monthly check), and so sick he couldn't find his butt with both hands.

Instantly the manner of his Limbo hangers-on changed. They had known, perfectly well and all along, what he was trying to do, and had been smiling up their sleeves.

As they drove out through the fantastic gateway, the Limbos were pushing Thorens around the inside of the bug, from one to another, playfully. He complained bitterly that he had proved he was a good fellow, and sincerely wanted their friendship.

They responded in relatively gentle fashion—perhaps because of their high spirits, which he had purchased for them. One member of the group had sought out Drag Drag, back in Virgin Springs. He was a hale specimen, and so the others held Thorens down for him, howling and chortling over results. Thorens vomited on shoes, and was kicked surprisingly little. Through the long night they carted Thorens back to his office in Damn Earth, where they threw him in through a window.

The HH records—all of them; the records of nineteen years of HH activity on Limbo; quite irreplaceable, if hardly of any significant worth—made quite a fire in the pot-belly stove in Thorens' office. Until the wee hours, he tore the contents of six filing-cabinets and his desk into thumbnail-size pieces and fed them to the flames. He crouched before the pot-belly, face contorted, eyes glazed to a mica finish, mouth busy (pursed, stretched to gargoyle width, pursed again), like some alchemist working a miracle of hate. Then

he danced around the room, laying about him with a metal lamp, creating dents and splinters in the woodwork and breaking every pane of glass in the place. He relieved himself all over the floor—puddles and lumps—and then set fire to the desk and lay down beside it, waiting to be consumed.

When the smoke became too much to bear, he got up and doused the fire with water from the sink. Death might be welcome—but too much discomfort preceded it.

At that moment, and in the days that followed, he set himself to survive. The nightmares of that task refuted Darwin.

He must polish dirty apples, lick boots and behinds, take every kind of filth and violence the diseased minds of Limbo could dish out. He must be the mascot of maniacs, the whipping-boy of a collective Id, the creature around explicitly to be hurt, bullied, tormented, used; for this gave him a functional value not easily duplicated on this little world of paranoid sadists. He was the goat among the Judas wolves; he gave them something they needed, the sight of abject fear, and it bought his life from day to day, for the Limbos held everything but themselves in hate and contempt, and everything was so far away—except John Thorens.

He won scars, hideous memories, and the continuation of life. His first serious beating was at the hands of Turk. Thorens was bedridden for three days, with hot pads on his abdomen and groin. Turk came around on the second night for some more of the same, took one look at Thorens' haunted eyes, and went away muttering something about "necrophilia"—possibly the only five-syllable word the man knew; certainly in a predictable category.

His value as patsy begot Thorens champions: it was circulated that the man who killed him would be buried all around him as a garnish; and when one day a visitor from the nearby town of Freedom had thumbed his knife and advanced to whittle Thorens for the sin of stumbling against him, another knife, flipped expertly from sheath and halfway across the street into the back of the visitor's skull, had ended that. Two days later Thorens' rescuer got whopped at blackjack and worked off his annoyance by beating Thorens into a state of gibbering half-consciousness and throwing him at the mirror behind Potts' bar. Potts, in order to save the mirror, had hastily interposed his own body. Staggered by the impact, he had missed his first knife-throw at the offender. Not so the second. Then, upset by the entire episode, he had himself completed the job on Thorens and thrown him out.

Of course, not all the Limbos were as totally vicious and depraved as Turk, Potts, and their crowd. Some were scarcely

more than brutally playful. Others were as often as not oblivious of Thorens' existence, unless he made the mistake of attracting their attention. In all, however, was the corrupt vein of cruelty, whether manifested by sins of commission or omission . . . a cruelty born of not-caring, of detachment from things human, of ruthless self-interest. They had stepped out of society and out of history to live their lives as a whim.

So he couldn't count on protectors—except on an unpredictable basis, where a wrong guess might be fatal. Nor, failing human bulwarks, could he find shelter, haven, sanctuary—for there was no place on Limbo to hide.

On a few occasions, Thorens thought he had made friends—especially among the newcomers who arrived in batches now and then. There was even camaraderie. But always came betrayal. At last he grew to understand the contamination factor in this world where the floodgates were down and the newcomer quickly inundated. He developed an instinct that told him that now was the time to step out of the path of one he had befriended, for another superego had gasped its last and another madman been born.

Unlike his predecessor, Thorens had no devout religious convictions to sustain him (or, for that matter, to cause his immediate downfall).

No protectors. No physical escape. No mystical source of courage and strength . . .

Naturally, then, Thorens had a project underway, as sensitive men will have when forced to exist under conditions which they cannot bear but must. To it he devoted the predictable amount of fanatic concentration. Its title was *LIMBO—Hell in Space*, and some forty thousand words were completed in first draft. Thorens had a knack for literary expression—but the book, growing as it did from daily torment and indignation, was jumbled, incoherent, chaotic. Into it he poured his boundless hatred, his piteous cries, his curses and protests all unuttered in actuality. In it were masses of words bundled into sobs; scalding portraits of his individual tormentors, and descriptions in vivid and anatomical detail of the punishments he wished he could visit upon them; lengthy, sprawling psycho-social analyses that would not have satisfied a more objective eye. The book was a monstrous panorama which, drawn in the convulsive strokes of his agony, had even a certain power. With words as weapons, he slew his tormentors; and without that outlet he might have gone mad. Or perhaps the book was itself his madness, externalized.

So far—so far—from home. . . .

Three hundred million miles.

Turk shifted heavily (the hippopotamus responding to what?) His eyes turned to stare back into the room, seeking Thorens. "Patrol ship," he said sourly, disappointedly. "Tough guys." (That was what.) Then he kept his eyes on Thorens. Savoring melodrama, he grinned a slow grin.

At the bar, Potts cackled like a hen getting it, and said, "Hooray—those babies drink hard!"

Thorens got up stiffly and went toward the rear of the bar. He heard Turk wheeze behind him, the scrape of the fat man's boots on the floor—trying to get up—and he walked faster. He reached the toilet and locked the door behind him, leaned against the wall. He stood that way for a few minutes, face wet, throat tight, stomach churning. Still nailed to the wall was the now pageless binding of his copy of *Paradise Lost*. He put his hand on it. Milton had lived and written (and had written *Regained!*)—there was an Earth, somewhere—there was a human spirit . . .

His other hand touched the long, thick, pointed sliver of wood tied to his thigh with dirty string. It was his "knife." He would never have the nerve to use it. What would Turk do if he discovered it? Finally the nausea passed. Turk, chuckling, had gone away too.

They trooped in, the tough young men in Patrol uniforms. As usual, they sat around the front end of the bar, laughing, raising a hubbub, ignoring the scowling Limbos. One reached up to the shelf and turned off the *maestro* . . .

—feel like a motherless—

. . . and turned on the trivision. Hot, atonal music. A painted girl (gold, orange and green) dancing against a swirling, color-organ background. Whistles, laughter. Hands uplifted in the "I've-been-in-Space-and-I-need-it!" sign.

Back at his table, Thorens mourned his mother. The Negro contralto's song had sounded all the resonances. Now thoughts of Mom shook his skull—the H-bomb of the subconscious, the firecracker of the conscious. Tears were shaken from hiding, and flowed. Thorens' head lowered to his hands. He remembered her voice singing (*London Bridge is Falling Down*), remembered clearly from childhood (or thought he did) the taste of her breasts (he had been bottle-fed), her caresses (*Ooo, he has such a cute little man-thing! . . . Mummy's going to tickle it!*), her smile from close above, and sweet breath—

Thorens' head proceeded to the table—forehead on scum—his biography welling up to add mass to present agonies.

That smile had not been a happy one, he knew, but a brave one concealing sorrow. Ah, God—why couldn't *she* have found some happiness, at least? Why, of all women, had that sweet, gentle creature had to suffer so year after year after—

I'll never, never be happy, Johnny . . . never . . . he did that to me. But I have you, my dearest . . . thank God, I have you, for ever and ever, my own sweet Johnny . . . you'll stay with Mummy always, won't you? . . . (a tear falls on his absorbent cheek) We're all we have, all alone together, we'll never let each other go. . . .

Waa-a-a-aal

Age 4: *Mummy, why don't I have a Daddy?*

I'm your Mummy and Daddy, my poor, poor darling. . . .

Am I funny because I don't have a Daddy?

You're very, very lucky, dearest, because we have each other! . . .

Tell me a story.

Once upon a time, there was a big, bad ogre, and he had a wife and a little boy. . . .

Ages 5 to 10: the usual violent, external, childhood preoccupations. Plus moderate pyromania, kleptomania, sadistic extermination of insects, and cowardice.

Age 12: *Mummy* (yes; still "Mummy," at 12), *can't you get married again? Couldn't we have another Daddy?* (Yes, "Daddy"—that fiendish cut-out silhouette, that monstrous burning outline, that gap in consciousness crying to be filled with good. The word "husband" was unfamiliar and mysterious—it was another's term to hate.)

Soft laughter: *But Mummy doesn't want to get married again, darling. You're all she wants!*

Worried: *I heard you and Bill last night. . . .*

Surprised: *You mean . . . when we argued? But, darling—you were in bed! Why, you shouldn't have had to hear a thing like that! . . .*

Increased worry about status: *Are men really—all you said—about rotten filthy animals! . . . gosh, you sounded so mad, Mummy . . . what happened?*

Soft laughter—now bitter-edged: *I'll tell you, darling—when you're a little older. Quickly: But you're so good, my angel . . . you'll never be like that! . . .*

Gee, I like him, Mummy! . . . he said he wanted to be my Daddy! . . .

That's what he said, dear . . . but you know about your Daddy. . . .

Adolescence came along. Widened horizons, and final enlightenment. They were two, wrapped in perfect under-

standing and togetherness against the untrustworthy world. Re-election to the womb.

Young manhood; and momentary deafness to the liturgy of the womb as he played in its antechamber. A wild pouring of juices—counter-attack, but no ultimate weapon. Virginity romped into the past, bounced, and came back saying gently to "save it for love." A pleasure-palace is not a home, especially when haunted.

Age 24. Dirge, for violin and sobs: *Mom . . . I'm sorry. I'll never leave you again. I didn't know you were sick. . . .*

It's all right, dear (cough)—as long as we're together. It's nice that you could see Europe.

There's nothing anywhere to beat my sweet Mom!

(Cough)

Mom . . . are you worse? Can I bring you something? I'm fine. . . .

What did the doctor say?

. . . perhaps a glass of milk, darling?

Age 28. From the cannibal's pot into the fire, or the Stretched Umbilical: *Mom, Helen and I eloped . . . we're married . . .*

I want you to be happy, darling . . . you're all that matters to me now. Don't worry about me. I'll be all right (cough). I'm not too old to work, and I have Ginger (meow) . . .

Soon, the Resilient Umbilical, or Newton's 1st Law as applied to inanimate psyches: *Mom . . . Helen has left me . . .*

Oh, my poor baby! . . .

Don't say that! That's what SHE called me! She said I could never support a wife and family—

Oh, you will! You're young. . . .

—until I grew up! Mom, aren't I grown up?

Of course, baby! . . . your room is just as you left it. . . .

Oh, God—God!—why can't I be happy!

Poor Johnny . . . there isn't any real happiness in the whole rotten world. Oh, my poor darling—I'd hoped I was wrong! But I could see what she was. . . .

The heart's doors are slamming, and Thorens discovers prostitutes. He likes it that way. He is not liked in return. But his money is good—and in minor violence, contempt, not-caring, and degradation-of-partner, he is a man. Or the animal part of a man that boggles at a halo.

Age 32. Abortive engagement to Sylvia . . . where is Sylvia? Thrills of "We've found each other!" and "Here we are!" and "After two weeks, we're still here!" . . . quite a girl, beautiful, an intellectual mate, inspiring desperate gaiety. Talk of marriage, and then to bed—and phfft when the chips are down: impotent the first time and much of the time.

Simultaneously, friendly disagreements commence—aesthetics, philosophy, modes of thought. Thorens is the aggressor. The fear of success, when guilt holds a cross before it. Arguments descend to mundane levels . . . where to go tonight, what to do? They try to straighten out, Sylvia not inexpertly—psychological, erotic, loving, concerned. Thorens fights rescue. Wonder and worry, fond jokes good and bad, then growing frustration, bewilderment, impatience, parlor analysis, dread, despair, counter-recrimination, worse communication, withdrawal, bitterness, apathy, no more love and flight. Never had a chance. He'll show the whores he's a man.

Age 36. Marianne comes along. Hot diggety. She looks like Mom used to. Subconscious sanction and sanctity. Wild plunge and wheel for a time; then phfft. She's less than Mom, who played the piano. And Mom wouldn't ever be so coarse in bed . . . strictly an abstract thought. (By this time, in Marianne's view, Thorens is peanuts compared to Daddy's image—so their appetites disengage.)

Age 39. The mathematics of guilt:

1) *Mom . . . I want to make you happy . . . buy you that place in the country, with rambler roses. Oh, God, I haven't DONE enough! I'll make it up to you! I'll get a really good job, and—*

Plus:

2) *Don't worry about me, Johnny . . . please. (Cough) My life is over.*

Equals:

3) Tears at night, anxiety breathing, obsessive determination, aggression, action, want-ads, HH, *Limbo*.

Minus Mom.

Strong, soft arms that now were husks, and the only truly understanding eyes in the Universe were closed and desiccated, and the last sound-wave of her voice had slowed and dispersed to become only air molecules, and the incredible goddess is gone, gone, save from her castle—the tortured subconscious of her son. In compound gear, where Oedipus engages Death, Thorens had wandered that night a month ago, the spacegram from his uncle crumpled in his hand, and for some reason—perhaps it was his eyes—the Limbos had let him alone. The next night he had been beaten twice (by Limbo bull dikes . . . perhaps again it was his eyes), and started his book. Its title page read

LIMBO: HELL IN SPACE
My Life Unendurable!

In Memory of My Mother

A valid construction. The subconscious is quite a thing.

"Thorens!"

Thorens flinched and slowly raised his head. One of the Patrolmen had spotted him and got up—now came around the end of the bar lithely, one hand braced on the shoulder of a comrade. Thorens watched him come, struggling up out of his welter of tangled, miserable introspection.

"Hi!" The Patrolman dropped into a seat and in the same motion poured a little of his drink into Thorens' empty glass. "Still alive, I see, eh?"

"Still alive, Lieutenant."

"Not as bad as you thought at first, eh?"

"Not as bad."

Lieutenant Mike Burman was blocky and space-burned; head well shaped, mouth wide, eyes just a little too closely set; about 26; less than a year out of the Space Academy at Gagaringrad. This was his sixth stop-over on Limbo. He had met Thorens on his first, four months ago, and each time since. In him seemed to stir a vague sympathy for the little man—as vague and unformed as his comprehension of Thorens' true predicament on Limbo. Over any comprehension rode a Boston-bred suspicion that all such phenomena as Limbo and its gutterbums weren't quite real, or at least shouldn't be. But he admired the Helping Hand. His family contributed regularly. He supposed things *were* fairly disordered on Limbo, poor devils. It was good to see a Hand out here, on the job. When you came right down to it, it all had rather a touch of romance. Thorens' tales of woe he chose, for the most part, to discredit. After all, there was a limit. Space, he knew, bred strange types—strong men, eccentric men—men possessed of some personal Hell. Like Thorens.

Looking at the young idiot, Thorens managed a smile. "It's good to see you. How's Earth?"

"Oh . . . still there, the last time I looked!" Burman laughed at his wit, and Thorens moved his lips to join in.

Turk looked over at them. Burman caught the fat man's gaze and looked away in dignified distaste. "That—animal won't have much luck with *my* boys."

Without moving, Turk spoke in a voice that carried: "Lonely, kid?"

Mike Burman ignored him, his expression showing irritation, some embarrassment, an attempt to conceal that embarrassment, and confidence in status. Turk grinned at his little joke and spat on the floor, drawing a scowl from Potts. At the bar, one Patrolman nudged another, amused at their Boston-born leader's discomfiture.

"Y'know, I've asked around a little," Burman said to Thorens. "None of the Patrolmen stationed here has ever seen anyone lay a finger on you!" He grinned, his expression somehow sly. "You were putting it on a little, eh?"

"Maybe a little." *You fool! . . . of course they leave me alone when the Patrol is around!*

Now Mike Burman frowned suddenly, exaggeratedly, as if he had just remembered something. "Hey, that reminds me, Thorens. I've got a message for you. You're supposed to go in and see the Lieutenant-Com."

A burst of laughter from the bar had drowned out his last few words. Thorens was blinking in that direction. Burman repeated the message: "You're supposed to go in and see the 2nd C. O."

Thorens looked at him. "What for?"

"I don't know," Mike Burman lied . . . *You're shipping out, Thorens. Earthside. I know, because you're going back on my ship. That's what the Old Man wants to tell you. . . .*

"You didn't get the message at your office," Burman explained, "so they told me to look you up."

"I haven't been there for three days." In the dark Universe behind John Thorens' eyes there appeared the tiniest, most hesitant flicker of animation—the stirring of some minute, slumbering particle; a particle that might become a flame . . . a light . . . a sun. The creation of suns from empty nothingness is mysterious; the creation of Hope is mystery itself. But the stirring primal particle in John Thorens' Universe darkened to nothingness again.

(. . . *Your mother's last wish, Thorens—and then your Uncle got to some softie in the HH. So back you go, for the atomicremation. Frankly, though, don't you think you're kind of running out on the job?*)

Thorens had lived with the "message" for about ten seconds now. The particle of sub-Hope dared to stir again, since no inimical forces had put in an appearance.

"Why should the Old Man want to see me?" he whispered.

"Your packet," Burman said. "I think that's what it's about." He winked at himself in the mirror. Tomorrow, after all, was soon enough for Thorens to know the facts. Besides, Burman had no authorization to pass the real dope along. The packet—clever.

"My packet?" Thorens said, still whispering. "My packet? What about it?"

(The packet was the monthly HH mailing to all its Hands, containing: Instructions (if any); pay-check; report forms;

requisition-slips for needed supplies (if any); and the monthly news-bulletin, BROTHERLY LOVE.)

"It came open, during shipping," Burman said casually. "You're supposed to check it over, see that it's all in order. Regulations."

No icy, rushing, negative forces were required to extinguish the particle. It simply went out. "That's funny," Thorens whispered. "That's funny. That's funny."

Burman milked it. "Speaking of Earth, it's spring now in New York."

"Lord," said Thorens, after a moment, in a starving voice, "the stinking heat'll be coming along. . . ."

"Bad winter. Twenty-eight inches of snow one time. You couldn't drive a bug."

"I know. You told me last time. How are the new model bugs?"

"Chrysler's finally bringing out that one-wheel job."

Thorens shook his head. "I wouldn't trust it. You hit two-hundred and the gyro goes out and you start turning thirty-foot cartwheels."

Tears gleamed on his cheeks. Burman shot him a look and pursed his lips, feeling a twinge.

The trivision began to chant out a spaceman's song, describing the average spacehand's affection for his superior officers. The Patrolmen at the bar set up a roar, and one shouted to Mike Burman, "Hey, loot! This one's dedicated to you!" Then they took up the song:

"Just tell him for me, he's an essuvabee,

"And his mother's a Martian monstros-s-sity!"

Thorens blinked—(*Sometimes I feel . . .*)—and shifted in his seat, feeling the comfortable if temporary security provided by the presence of these men.

A woman came in. Tall, hard-faced, green-eyed, with clipped dark hair. She wore two knives, handles forward. Her leather breastplates were neither new nor badly scarred, which meant her steel was fast. Eyes of Limbos brushed her up and down appreciatively, but no one made the sign. This one could make it herself, if she wanted a stud. The tough ones were unpredictable. They might even be dikes, out to lure a male into ambush (though this one didn't wear the prominent falsie affected by the more aggressive lesbians). She got her drink, moved to a corner table.

At the bar a big young Patrolman new to Limbo, singing, had not taken his eyes off her ample curves. His chest had swelled. Now her eyes caught his gaze and became icy

green flames. He looked away hastily, remembering a briefing.

Thorens' lips curled in loathing, hatred, contempt. The women of Limbo were even more repellent than the men. Especially the swaggering, strutting, leather-garbed alleycats of Damesville, with their cruel eyes and filthy mouths. That *they* should continue to live—

Mike Burman had been smiling at the song, and at his men's loud endorsement of the fact that he was a *essuvabee*. "Speaking of sons of bitches," he grinned, "two real beauts are heading Earthside!" He almost added: "*—with you, on my ship—*" but fortunately he caught himself.

Thorens still glared at the woman, head down, eyes up, "Paroles?" he asked, not caring.

"In one case," Burman nodded. "For him." He pointed to Potts. "The other one's going back so the shrinkers can have another look. Him." He pointed to Turk.

It took a moment to sink in—a process of appalled disbelief to furious rejection of fact to bitter acceptance that shriveled to numbness. Music blared from the trivision as the song ended. Applause, more laughter. Thorens' face sagged off the front of his skull—his voice seemed wrenched out of him: "*Those two?*"

Burman stared at Thorens, not realizing (*hate*) what he had done. The trivision started (*hate*) a new wham 'n bam song hit, and the two singers (*hate*) began to fake their blows at each other.

—it canceled John Thorens' mind, shuddered down through his body to explode at his extremities. It was stronger than any other emotion he had ever known. He contracted in his chair, elbows and knees doubling. Half-huddled thus, he trembled violently. *Hate Turk, hate Potts, bite lips, taste blood, fight down puke, hate, hate—*

Those two . . . flying up out of Hell to the distant blue-green world that was Heaven . . . *No—no—no. . .*

Mike Burman searched the distorted features of the little, sandy-bearded man who sat opposite him. He talked, feeling uncomfortably that there seemed little else to do: "Potts—lack of conclusive evidence of premeditation. Changed to second degree, sentence commuted to what he's already served. And Turk—recalled for psychiatric—"

He said a few more words, hesitantly, barely audible under the general din, while he studied Thorens' face.

Thorens seemed to catch fire. He thrust up out of his chair, overturning it. "*Damn you!*" he gasped. "*No. . . not them. . . get me a transfer. . . get me a parole. . . me. . .*" his breath causing strands of Burman's hair to move, and

shrieked at the top of his lungs: "Take me to Earth—not them!"

An interested silence fell over the bar, save for the trivision's wham 'n bam. Hands of Limbos went to knives, anticipating action. The Patrolmen instantly, but casually, grouped to leave, as protocol required.

But this was an unusual situation. Little Thorens, the Hand, was blowing his stack at the Patrol loot. Expressions became uncertain.

Mike Burman was rearing back in dismay, as if Thorens' cry had boosted him under the chin. "What? *What?* Why, I don't—Christ, Thorens, I really—"

Thorens swayed there, shoulders forward, hands working. His half-closed, watering eyes caught a flicker of movement outside the window—and even in his extreme agony he could chill at a strange sight—

Two giants.

Then details registered and became not strange. He heard, from far away, someone at the door say, "Somebody bringing a spacesuit in here."

Eyes, turning from the tableau at the table to the door, saw a gigantic spacesuit float from the darkness. Gleaming, shining, towering, it resembled a deep-sea diving suit with its great windowed helmet, its claw gloves, its massive body three feet across, seven and one half feet high. A big man carried the suit, his right arm about its waist, his left arm grasping its left arm. In this manner, holding it erect like a dancing-partner or more like someone getting a gentle bum's-rush, he walked the suit across the fog-shrouded concrete roadway, up onto the curb toward Potts' bar. With one hand he opened the door; with the other he easily jumped the suit across the sill. The suit weighed three hundred pounds.

The voice said, "Fixin' job, Turk." Turk nodded, his small admiring eyes fastened on the huge figures in the door.

Handsome, golden-haired, the newcomer; six feet nine inches tall and grinning. He stood there, balancing his specially built suit with its sprung demand-valve. "Where fat man?" he rumbled.

Thorens was stumbling toward the door. Mike Burman looked after him, eyes bright with bewilderment, pique, vague sympathy. Then, whistling tunelessly between his teeth, he started back for his fellows at the end of the bar. He called to 1st Engineer's Mate "Goldy" Svenson to join them as soon as he got rid of the suit.

Thorens scooped a bottle off the bar, evading its owner's indignant grab, and in perfect silence threw it at the head of the Damesville woman with all his might. It smashed

against the wall by her head—or rather where her head had been, for she was on her feet screaming and pulling her steel. Glass from the bottle still skittered and tinkled as she drew back full-arm for the throw that would skewer Thorens. A roar and a whoop had gone up from the bar. Men doorwise from the woman scattered from the line of fire. Men behind her watched, heads turned.

Mike Burman shouted an order in single-syllable Patrol Code. Three Patrolmen sprang to positions between Thorens and the woman. They didn't draw their guns—they didn't have to. The woman's throw was already started; she couldn't hold it back; so she clung to the blade in a balk-throw and sank its point two inches into the floor at her feet. Instantly she snatched her second knife from sheath, on guard against the Limbo men. Glaring around, she cursed the grinning Patrolmen in two languages, English and dike.

"Where fat man?" rumbled "Goldy" Svenson again. He had not moved.

Turk said, "Right here, cop." As he began to wheeze, preparatory to getting up, his eyes clamped on the giants at the door, a third figure, small and furtive, dodged around them into the night.

Watching Thorens go, Mike Burman thought: *Christ! . . . I almost wish I'd told him. . . .*

Across the roadway from Potts' bar was a steep rocky slope that led down to darkened fields some thirty feet below, and the flat gray expanse of the Spaceport beyond. A barbed-wire fence ran along the edge of the road, to discourage drunken Limbos from brawling through the fields and trampling the crops. Thorens bent down the top strand, tearing his forefinger to the bone. He stepped over. He took two blind steps, put a foot over the incline to encounter nothingness, and spilled, rolled, flopped to the bottom. He lay on his back in the rain-ditch, face barely out of the filthy water, and cried.

The seconds and minutes of his grief wore on. An occasional star winked down through the chill, slow-moving fog. Thorens squinted up at each and sobbed the louder, wishing that mysterious forces could mesh to make him a vanished man, could transport him to each speck's vast flaming surface, push or pull him into the nuclear inferno of its interior, plunge him into the sweet methane or ammonia or formaldehyde of the atmosphere of its planets, if it had planets, or send him hurtling onto the bitter, airless surface of any of its planets' satellites—or rush him away to a point midway between the two suns that were Mira (which he

recognized), there to hang suspended as a mote that once had lived but now took its motion, its vectors, its orbit, its course through Infinity and Eternity, as the product of forces that were not consciously cruel.

Footsteps above Thorens choked a sob into utter silence. His hands, under water, clenched at mud. His legs tightened in terror, and developed a cramp.

"Hear it?" a voice said, from the road.

"Yeah."

"See anything?"

"Too dark. Sounded like crying."

"Let's look."

Thorens heard the wire creak as it was stretched down, and, clearly, the whisper of a long knife from sheath. He gulped in air and sank his face under the water—it murmured in his eardrums, transmitting his own tiny movements.

When his lungs could stand it no longer, he bobbed his head up and gasped through his burning throat, "Kill me! Why am I hiding? Please, oh, my God, please, *kill me!*"

He lay with wide eyes staring up; he saw Mira appear, then disappear again into the fog. He saw the suns, the worlds, the moons, the vacuums and infernos that filled the reaches of space, but could not notice him nor help him to die. He waited, with a mixture of mud and gastric juices in his mouth, for the fist, the stone, the boot, the knife.

The fog around him was empty. Footsteps faded far down the road. They had not been curious enough to come down—or perhaps they had thought it was a muggers' trap.

If the latter, Thorens thought frantically, they might be going to get some friends together, so they could come back and fight. His arms and legs grasped, pumped, scrambled, flailed, as he crawled up the slope. He did not want to die.

Turk's Repair Shop was located in a shack behind Potts' bar. In it were a tool bench, some metal-working machinery, and a cot on which Turk slept when he was too tired or too drunk to make his way home. While the patrol naturally maintained its own repair facilities for spacesuits and all other equipment, still Turk was expert and dependable—and he would work at night, when the Patrol machine-shops were closed. Also, when Patrolmen patronized Turk, they received a bonus in addition to good workmanship, i. e., tips on what bars were or were not watering their liquor that week, and where the cleanest girls were to be found, and at what gambling-dive the tables were running against the house. So Turk prospered. And no Limbo objected. What Turk did was, in the long run, good public relations.

Now, in the light of overhead 'tomics, Turk labored to repair "Goldy" Svenson's spacesuit—but he was thinking about John Thorens.

What a funny little bastard the Hand was! Sure, he got clobbered, day after day . . . but he asked for it! The crummy little milksop *asked* for it. He never talked to you straight from the shoulder. He hid in the back of his skull and played angles. He looked at you with his rubbery little face, and you knew he expected you to murder him, so you got mad and did it. All he cared about was *out*. He ran around Limbo like a turpentine pup, squawking to lifetermers about *out*. It was a drag. He'd make it off Limbo sooner or later, and good riddance. Right now he was just exactly where everybody else was, except for one thing—he looked at you that way and you had to cream him.

Then Turk started thinking about "Goldy" Svenson, all six feet nine inches of him, and that was Turk's mistake.

He undid eight screws and lifted a curved plate away from the back of the suit . . .

Thorens turned the last corner. His office was burning.

"We read your book," a voice said from the shadows. "It started a good fire."

That's Joe Moore's voice, Thorens thought. Joe. I bought you a drink on your second night on Limbo. And you said you were sorry for me. You said you were innocent of any crime. You hated the place as I do. What made you run with the pack?

"When you start yelling at the law," another voice said, "that's bad. Creates a scene. Draws attention. You need a lesson."

"But we won't kill you, you little bastard," another voice said. "You're too much fun to have around."

Thorens screamed, and for the second time since his arrival on Limbo dared to run. This time, he thought agonizedly, he must get away.

But that was before a belt-buckle, aimed low, lashed out of the darkness *ahead* of him.

They gathered around in Turk's Repair Shop and looked down at the large, sprawled, melted-looking, half-boiled, red and gray thing with staring, milky eyes that had been Turk.

Here and there white showed, where flesh had sagged in blobs away from bone. The cracked skin glistened with oil, cooked up out of Turk's enormous supply of fat.

"Christ!" said one. "Did you hear him *scream*!"

The spacesuit stood where it had killed Turk. But now it

was harmless. Potts' frantic call to the Spaceport had brought a Radiation Squad on the double. (Wild radiation was one of the very few things on Limbo that the Patrol would tend to, mainly to insure the safety of their own men stationed there.) An officer in protective clothing had gone into Turk's shack and closed the small plate that covered the spacesuit's atomic-power-pack. The radiation, though it had killed Turk quickly and then cooked him through prolonged exposure, counted its half-life in mere minutes; so now the room was safe to enter.

The officer was removing the radiation suit. His companion said casually, "You know how it happened, anybody?"

Heads shook *no*. One man snickered and the officer looked at him: "What's funny?"

"What isn't?"

"Do you know what happened?" (Ordinarily, the officers wouldn't have given a damn what happened; but since Patrol equipment was involved, they had to shape up a report.)

The man shrugged. "Those plates are close together . . . the one on the power, and the one to the oxy-system. I guess he got careless."

"What's funny?"

"I owed him eighty bucks on blackjack," the man smirked. "He was graving me for it. I was going to kill him myself, and he saves me the trouble!"

The officers looked around, mouths curled in wry distaste. The Limbos grinned back, disliking them, wishing they could kill them—but no one could be safer anywhere than a Patrolman on Limbo.

Without another word the Patrolmen left. Over the motor-noise of their bug fading down the street, Potts cursed as he looked at the mess on the floor: "How do I clean *this* up?"

"Bring in stray dogs," one man said.

Potts nodded appreciatively. "That's sharp." He kicked the mess in the ribs, and more of them became exposed. "You fat slob! You're gonna smell for a month!" He went over to the spacesuit. "Somebody help me get this damn thing outa the way!"

Two men joined him, and they inched the heavy bulger toward a wall.

Lieutenant Mike Burman was among the watchers, with some of his buddies. He stared down at the mess, thinking, *He never even knew he was going back.*

Potts wrestled with the spacesuit. Another step, and his foot slipped on the wrench that Turk had dropped in dying, and he lurched sideways. He made the error of hanging onto the suit, trying to right himself, and his added weight

overbalanced it and took it out of the hands of the other two helping him. For a second they made an effort to hold it back, but the mass was great and slippery, and so they let go, with the suggestion of shrugs.

In mid-air, falling, Potts began to scream. The suit followed him down in the same arc, not very quickly, it seemed, stiffly, like an inexperienced lover bending to the loved. The heavy angle of a shoulder-plate shoved into Potts' mouth as the back of his head hit the floor, and his scream cut off, and his head grew wider and flatter with a crackling of bone. Blood ran.

The suit rolled partly off him, and they watched his hands twitch on loose wrists until finally every part of him was dead. The big young Patrolman who had looked at the woman was in a corner, holding his stomach with folded arms and swallowing excess saliva. Mike Burman was standing in front of him, thoughtful-eyed, as if not wanting the Limbos to see that Patrolmen had nerves.

He had another reason for being thoughtful. Tonight Mike Burman was very near to believing in Fate.

The Limbos looked at the spacesuit. One whistled.

Thorens takes a step, and somewhere in the cauldron of pain, humiliation and fear that is melting down his mind and nervous system to basic animal responses, float fragmentary memories of this last half-hour he has endured. . . .

Another step.

Let him go. A shape moves aside. He's had it.

One more.

A blow—somewhere in his back.

Lay off the kidneys. We don't want to kill him.

Please kill me.

Poker game at Charlie's . . . how about it?

Thought you were looking for Cat Redfield, to slice him.

Ah . . . I don't feel like it. Come on—let's go.

A nudge in Thorens' back, and he falls down. Drooling blood he gets up, takes a step.

Voices fade.

Another step. . . .

Walk through darkness, walk through pain, walk through fog past shadows that are things half-known, down winding, wet-gleaming streets, past lighted doors and windows, past jags and whirls and bursts of rainbow neon, under humming power lines, past toy factories whose tall smokestacks flicker at the tops with red-shot smoke (and through the walls a Teddy-bear grins; a shiny fire-engine blinks its head-

light eyes and sirens a hello; an electric monorail whirs on its figure-8 to nowhere; a sleek rocketship charts a course for a far-off, better world; a hundred, harmless, joyous games play noisily all by themselves; a Chem-Craft Set percolates a panacea, while an Erector Set places the last shining girder in its bridge to Elsewhere; a Limbo night-watchman sprawls, bottle in hand, surrounded by the Answer apparent to any boy—and through the walls a wistful touch, a yearning recollection)—and now *along a fence, over dirt, across sand, past stunted plants that never have seen day, past looming dark hills and silent mineral diggings with gaunt machinery like poised skeletons, past a silver Spaceport that is a door to Heaven that has no key, past men who stare and squint through foggy darkness and nudge each other and laugh, past sight and sound of men talking, laughing, breathing, and their hearts pumping blood that rushes noisily through tiny tubes surrounded by muscles that whisper against one another as they gather to give pain . . . walk past life, or around it, or over it, or any way but through it, to some other place.*

Walk crying, walk bleeding, walk hurting, through and then beyond the veil of thoughts that govern thought to keep the Universe real.

An alley. Muddy water cool around ankles. An alley, somewhere off behind the world, containing its refuse, its secrets, its littered history. An alley, closer to the past than a street . . . on the dark other side of Now. A building gray-crouched in the fog—a dirt-encrusted back window—a searching . . .

Her.

Thorens stopped, swayed, stared.

Her.

Giant shape waiting against the wall inside, outlined in reflected flickerings from the Spaceport across the way as a ship prepared to take devils to Heaven; and now it could go, and nobody cared, for an Angel had walked with love across the stars, and the Universe had heard, and now a giant shape, strong, exuding warmth, concern, a solidity—

Thorens' mind squirted out through the sutures of his skull.

Smash of window-glass—cut hands—*Has darling hurt himself? . . . let's see!* Toward the huge, longed-for shape, and that smile like the birth of a Sun: . . . *did you think Mummy was lost?*

Thorens was murmuring. His fists hurt from clenching. He lay down beside her. His head rested on the wide shoulder, his nose in the socket of the great neck. Outside, the rocket

blared, took off, yellow flash, up fast, faster, dying, echoes. *Mom, a big noise! It's all right, dear.*

Rubbing his cheek against the shining right arm, his left arm behind her back—close to the cool, sure strength. *Mom, it's getting dark . . . I'm afraid, Don't be, dear.* His hand rubbed gently in a small circle on the great arm. *I'm not so afraid now.* The rubbing grew feverish. He pressed his lips to the cold metal breast. Somebody else was there in the darkness, with a wide red head. *Hey, Potts! . . . hey, Turk! Come on and play! I'm not mad any more . . . all in free!*

A voice: *London Bridge is falling down—*

Toy stones tumble slow, hit toy water. Toy splash—nice, pretty. Nobody hurt.

Falling down, falling—

Stiffness in his abdomen—wrenching sensation, a dampness, suddenly a flow.

My fair lady. . . .

Close doors, slam hatches, lock windows, pull shades, dig moats, build dikes (kill!), fasten gates (but the giant lily opens petals to the sunrise)—eyelids shut and everything's outside. Pictures through a killedescape—white mountains with pink-candy tops—checkerboard fields and green, fragrant trees and little animals that stare with bright friendly eyes. Childhood was a wonderful place, even with the dead bird—so fun, so safe, so hurt to remember. Blanket tucked in warm, and the Sandman is coming, the sky rips down the middle, falls shining, and the world is sliced into (*Happy*) birthday (*to you!*) cake with roast turkey (*Turk-hurt? No, dear*); the song-voice rises, and London Bridge topples finally and forever across the *Thems*, amid waves and enveloping splashes of want-her—

Warm. Little legs drawn up against round little belly. Round little bottom (wet); finger poked into limp little mouth. *He's the living image of his mother. Oh, look. He's stopped crying!*

Curled moebius—no inside, no outside. Round safe impenetrable ball that it-they-those-all cannot open, cannot disturb from warm-wet sleep, cannot hurt, hurt no, hurt never, *hurt, Mummy? It's all right now, everything. . . .*

Deep breath—the last, the first. . . .

All . . . all . . . all rest. Hide-rest. Hide-sleep.

Hide-h-i-i-d-e-id-e-d-i-di-die-e.

. . . *Stay close?*

Yes . . .

. . . *More hurt?*

No. . . .

II

"What the hell is *that*?"

"It's coming from over here. The suit . . ."

"You're crazy."

"Listen."

"Open the belly-clamps."

"You open them."

"They already *are*." (Grunt.) "What the hell? Something's holding it shut from inside." (Louder grunt.)

?

!

"Jesus. . . ."

"What's *he* doing in there?"

"Look at his *face*!"

"Hey—come on out, stupid! Come *outa* there—" (Pause)

"For Christ sakes, he *bit* me!" (Slug!) "Somebody call the Patrol. . . ." (Slap!)

"*Wa-aa-a-a-aa-a-a-a!*"

Two Patrol bugs through the dawn-light on a howling Code Three. Laughing, chatting Limbos evicted for the steel Caesarean. A half-hour battle—sick tenderness, and tempers too. Finally the wailing, flailing, sweating, oversized foetus was born of Svenson's spacesuit.

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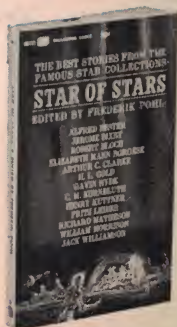
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